

SOMETHING WICKED  
IS COMING.

CITY OF  
**SOULS**  
AND  
**SINNERS**



A  
HOUSE  
OF DEVILS  
NOVEL



KAYLA EDWARDS

CITY of SOULS  
and SINNERS

*A House of Devils* NOVEL

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***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***



Books by Kayla Edwards:

The *Ice and Iron* Series

*Dreams of Ice and Iron*

—

The *House of Devils* Series

*City of Gods and Monsters*

*City of Souls and Sinners*



CITY of SOULS

and SINNERS

*A House of Devils* NOVEL

KAYLA EDWARDS

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A House of Devils Novel  
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For my family—  
The light in my dark.

## Welcome back to Angelthene

As always, we hope you enjoy your stay. Please avoid going out after sunset, and keep a form of protection on you at all times. The use of Blood Staves is strictly prohibited. Darkslayers operate in the city, so exercising a high level of caution in all districts is highly recommended for residents and visitors. Avoid unnecessary travel to the Meatpacking District, Hooded Skullcap, Stone's End, Ebonfield, Oldtown, the Narrow Hills, and the Black Alder District. Travel to Angelthene National Forest is recommended only between the hours of seven a.m. and three p.m. All cell phones within city limits are programmed to receive alerts regarding Blood Moons. If a Blood Moon is in the forecast, stay inside the forcefield until dawn. Report any suspicious activity to the Magical Protections Unit immediately.



# DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

## ***The Seven Devils***

Marked with a horned letter S in the gothic script of an ancient world,  
they answer to Darien Cassel, Head of Hell's Gate

---

## ***The Reapers***

Marked with the cloaked and masked God of Death, they answer to  
Malakai Delaney, Head of the House of Souls

---

## ***The Huntsmen***

Marked with a Hellhound, they answer to Lionel Savage, Head of the  
Hunting Grounds and former Right Hand of Randal Slade

---

## ***The Angels of Death***

Marked with overlapping wings in white ink, they answer to Dominic  
Valencia, Head of Death's Landing

---

## ***The Wargs***

Marked with a crescent moon in luminescent ink, they answer to  
Channary Graves, Head of the House on the Pier

---

## ***The Vipers***

Marked with an animated striking serpent, they answer to Jude  
Monson, Head of the Den of Vipers

After the unexpected death of Randal Slade, who the Darkslaying circles of Angelthene answer to is to be determined. No one outside of these six circles may operate on Angelthene soil. To do so is punishable by death.

*For a full list of characters, flip to the back of the book*

# PART I

## THE DEVIL AND THE WHITE LILY



Being human in Angelthene felt a lot like walking into a party you weren't invited to, only there was no end to that party, no quick escape by simply walking out the door.

Loren Calla had spent twenty years getting used to that feeling. As one of the only human students at Angelthene Academy for Magic, the party truly never ended. The whispers were constant, chasing her down every hallway and into every classroom. Balled-up sheets of paper were forever thrown at the back of her head. Students made it their daily goal to trip or bodycheck her into rows of lockers. Sure, there was the odd time when she made it through a whole school day without being the victim to any of these things, but those days were rare. And when it wasn't whispers, paper cannon balls, or feet swept out to trip her, her problems usually involved trying not to be killed by one of the magical beings that made Angelthene such a dangerous place.

Whispers, paper cannon balls, and feet were far better forms of conflict than bullets, teeth, and claws. Bullies, she could handle. Bullies, she had a high chance of surviving, as long as their attempts at making her life a living hell did not extend beyond these walls. But vampires, werewolves, demons, veneficae, and hellsehers? She was still learning how to live with those.

A lot had changed for Loren since her first day at Angelthene Academy, but as far as the other students were concerned, she was the same person she had always been.

Human. Weak. Ordinary. An easy target.

That was fine with her. They didn't need to know the truth, nor did she want them to. Better to be targeted for being human than to be targeted for housing the coveted powers of a legendary magical artifact.

Loren was doing her best to ignore the students seated at the table behind her in history class, but as the minutes wore on, and more balls of paper struck the back of her head, the harder it became to resist the urge to tell them off.

The students—three male warlocks who excelled at sports and not

much else—were some of the most persistent bullies she had ever encountered. It hadn't taken long after her first day here at AA to conclude they were worse than the kids she'd dealt with in high school, the ones who'd vandalized her locker and poured orange juice into her lap in the cafeteria on a near daily basis.

But she wasn't the same girl she was back in high school, nor was she the same girl who'd stood outside on the academy lawn with the other freshmen of the House of Salt last Septem. She wasn't even the same girl who'd walked the hallways before Kalendae. And if they threw one more ball of paper at her head, she just might lose it.

Roughly three weeks had passed since the city had been leveled by the explosion of the Arcanum Well replica, less than two weeks since she'd met her father on the dock at Jade Beach, and she had yet to recover from the shock of both events. But she tried not to dwell, especially on anything having to do with Erasmus Sophronia, creator of not only the Arcanum Well but of hellsehers. Thoughts of the man who'd introduced himself to her as her father didn't just make her head feel like it was being turned upside down, but also like it was being shaken. Vigorously.

She hadn't seen or talked to Erasmus since that windy afternoon at Jade Beach, but she was supposed to meet him at his house for supper tomorrow. Loren hadn't thought twice before accepting her father's invitation. She was desperate for answers, and even having to wait these few days to get those answers was torture.

How was he mortal again? How was it possible that he could still be alive after his skeleton—*his* skeleton, this fact confirmed by a DNA test at Lucent Enterprises—had been dug up in a grave in Angelthene National Forest? Why had he waited until she was nineteen to come looking for her? Did he ever regret abandoning her at the Temple of the Scarlet Star when she was a baby? Had he missed her at all?

It was these gnawing questions—and plenty more—that had led to their dinner arrangement. Friday evening, six o'clock. But now, as the seconds ticked away, and tomorrow loomed, she felt less like the newer, braver version of herself and more like the old.

She propped her chin in her hand and chewed her lip, tapping the worn eraser on the end of her pencil against her notebook, eyes that were glazed with disinterest flicking about the spacious classroom. Professor Griffith's lesson was dragging by at a snail's pace, her monotonous voice droning on and on. Loren couldn't recall one word that had left her mouth since the lesson started. She was usually attentive in class and looked forward to learning Terran history. Today? Not so much.

As she tapped her pencil on the page and stewed over having dinner with the father she barely knew, she considered inviting Darien

to go with her. The more she entertained the idea, the more tempting it sounded. If the conversation got awkward, she knew Darien would jump in and encourage her to voice all the questions she wanted to ask. Aside from that, she certainly wouldn't mind having him at her side. After all, he was the tastiest eye candy in all of Terra. And there was a solid chance he would hold her hand under the table the whole time, which still gave her butterflies, no matter how many times he did it. All he had to do was look at her and she melted.

Man, she was a sucker for him.

The crunch of paper being packed into a ball sliced into her thoughts. She braced herself, counting the seconds based off memory, before ducking her head to the left to dodge the incoming assault.

The ball of paper bounced onto the table she was sharing with Sabrina Van Arsdell and Dallas Bright. It rolled to the very edge before stilling, knocking another just like it to the scuffed floor. The balled-up papers scattered across the table were covered with words scrawled in black ink, but she hadn't bothered to unfold and read them. She didn't need to be a genius to know there was nothing on them but insults and filthy comments. Whispers were hard enough to ignore, and unless she wanted to wear earplugs twenty-four-seven, hearing them was pretty much unavoidable. In this case, she at least had a choice.

It was times like these that made her wish all eight-point-seven million people in this city had memory of the events of Kalendae, how they'd all died in that blast and were only here, at this very moment, because of her. The wish her father had purchased for her from Tempus the Liar, God of Time, had certainly helped. But if it weren't for the elusive power that hadn't graced her with its presence since that day, no one would be here. This city wouldn't even be standing. Instead, Darien was the only other person with full memory of Kalendae and time's reversal, though of course they'd trusted the others who were involved that day with the truth—the Devils, Dallas and Sabrina, Arthur, Logan, the Angels of Death, the few Vipers who had been present. The last thing she wanted was to be placed on a pedestal, but a little kindness and respect wouldn't hurt, especially after twenty years of being denied both.

Speaking of respect...

The warlocks behind her were snickering. The sound of another piece of paper being torn out of a notebook ripped through the otherwise silent classroom, and one of the boys started kicking the leg of her chair. *Thump, thump, thump*. Her seat was jarred forward with every strike of his shoe, until her torso was pressed right up against the edge of the table, wood digging in. The professor was too absorbed in her lesson to notice that the lone human in the group was

being harassed.

Story of Loren's life.

Blood boiling, Loren lunged over the table and grabbed one of the balled-up papers—the one with the words *half-life* and *slut* glaring at her through a sharp crease. She turned in her seat, wound her arm back, and threw it straight at Ethan McIntyre's smug face.

It nailed him right between the eyebrows.

His jaw dropped open, the snickering of his two bonehead friends fading into silence. They all gaped at her, mouths hanging open like fish gasping for air.

“The next thing *any* of you idiots throw at me is getting stuffed down your throats!” Loren hissed. The other students within earshot either stared at her in shock or laughed under their breath.

Loren waited, providing Ethan and his friends an opportunity to talk back and see where it got them. But they said nothing. With one last glare directed at Ethan, she turned back around to face the front.

She might pay for that later, when there was no professor around to intervene, but right now she simply didn't care. Though she made a mental note never to get caught anywhere alone with them.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she forced her rapid breathing to slow and deepen. The jittery feeling shaking through her body—and the tiny stars drifting across her vision—had less to do with Ethan and his pals than it did the magical tattoo warming the skin on the inside of her left forearm. Morning was winding down, and she'd had nothing but coffee and an apple for breakfast. Her heart was palpitating, and her lungs felt small and hot.

She should've known better than to eat so little.

Where she sat at Loren's right, scribbling flowers and vines on a page in her notebook, her sleek copper hair hiding part of her softly freckled face, Dallas gave a snort. “I have to admit,” the witch whispered, “I'm enjoying this new side of you.”

It had been a while since Dallas had found it necessary to fight Loren's battles for her. Loren decided her adoptive sister deserved the break, especially after all those years of nearly getting kicked out of middle and high school for defending her. Sometimes the arguments had escalated to physical fighting in cafeterias and schoolyards, the cheers of other students goading her on.

Taega and the Red Baron hadn't liked that.

“At least one of us is having a good time,” Loren whispered back. She drew another deep breath in through her nose, then slowly exhaled through her mouth. The edges of her vision were fogging up with the threat of a fainting spell, though the stars were now gone.

Sabrina, who was sitting at Loren's left, shushed them. Her almond eyes were glued to Professor Griffith, who waddled before the floor-to-

ceiling chalkboard in a gray pencil skirt and blazer, rambling on about the legend of Spirit Terra and the Crossroads. The dusty chalkboard was marked up with a diagram of three circles drawn in a straight row, a thin oval stretching diagonally across all three. White, green, and blue, the oval consisting of dashes instead of a solid line. Scrawled across the board beside the diagram was a list of words Loren was having trouble reading from this distance.

When was the last time she'd had her eyes checked? She squinted, barely making out the words *Ignis*, *Crossroads*, and one that looked like it said *Sunstone*. Or was it *Sandstone*? Cripes, her eyes were burning.

Where it sat at the edge of the table, sandwiched between stacked textbooks and grimoires, Loren's cell phone pinged—quietly, thank the skies. She must've forgot to mute the volume before coming to class. She checked to make sure the professor's back was facing the room before she leaned forward, pried the phone free, and hid it under the table.

Sabrina fidgeted, her fire-colored eyes—warm as two suns against her honey-brown skin—darting to the phone in Loren's hands. "She's going to catch you," she warned.

"Not likely." Loren unlocked her phone with her thumbprint. "She's too busy with her lecture." She pulled up the long message thread under the name DARIEN CASSEL and read what the leader of the Seven Devils had sent her.

*Morning, beautiful. When's your lunch?*

The endearment made Loren's heart sing. She checked the time on her phone. *In twenty minutes*, she replied.

*I'll meet you outside. You forgot your medication.*

Loren glanced down at her purse that was sagging by her feet.

That was strange. She remembered checking to see if the bottle was tucked in its usual side pouch before leaving Hell's Gate that morning. But it wasn't there now.

While she usually saw Darien strictly on weekends, they stole the odd weeknight together as well. Since they'd started dating, she found it even more impossible than before to stay away from him for long periods of time—and he was always more than willing to pick her up whenever she asked him to, which was exactly how she'd wound up at Hell's Gate on a Wednesday of all nights.

Loren typed up a reply, her nails—painted sparkly black and filed into points, a safety habit she wasn't willing to break, regardless that she spent most of her time surrounded by seven deadly Darkslayers—clicking on the cracked screen.

*It was in my bag this morning*, she wrote, taking care to keep her phone partially hidden in the folds of her plaid skirt. *Did you take it out so you would have an excuse to come and see me, Daredevil?*

*You know I always love to see you every chance I can get, but I would never take your medication, silly girl.* She already knew that; she just liked to tease him. Besides, he wasn't at Hell's Gate that morning, after being gone nearly all night, so how could he have possibly taken it? Darien added, *When I got home, I found Mortifer in the sitting room, shaking the bottle like a tambourine.*

Loren was trying not to laugh when Darien sent another message.

*He was dancing on the record player and damn near broke the thing. The guy's a menace. Mortifer the Menace—that's his new nickname. Did you know he likes country?*

This time, she barely managed to contain her laugh. Loren wrote back, *Did he swallow any?*

*Who knows? The cap's childproof, but I don't think they come Hobproof, do they?*

She was full-on grinning now. She knew she was pushing her luck, but she typed up another message. Rain plinked against the arched windows lining the wall, the sound blending in with the clicking of her nails on the phone screen. Another day of lousy weather.

*Sooooo*, she wrote. *did you have a nice night getting those knuckles bloody for Perez?* She added a winking face to the end of the message and hit SEND. She was always trying to make light of his need to fight at the Pit these days, since she knew how badly he wanted to change, not only for her but for himself. Since the events of Kalendae, his Surges had doubled in intensity and frequency. Loren hoped they would wear off soon, but until they did, she would be there for him in whatever way he needed her to be. No matter how many nights it took.

Darien wrote back: *Sweetheart, I'm insulted. I don't fight for shithheads like Perez, you know that.* Though she was suppressing a smile, Loren rolled her eyes. Leave it to Darien to get defensive over a harmless little comment like that. He fought only when *he* wanted to, not answering to anyone but himself. While people like Antonio Perez might benefit financially from Darien's participation in the fights, no one held him on a leash. Darien added, *And I wouldn't call ripping out demon throats a nice night, but you're a doll for pretending that you're okay with this.*

Loren chewed her lip. She checked to make sure Professor Griffith was still preoccupied with her lesson before she began typing. *Well, I don't know about that... We might need to come up with some sort of deal. You have no idea how cold the bed gets when you're not at home. My ass is freezing without you there.*

Darien's reply came through so quickly, she barely saw a typing bubble. *If we talk about your perfect ass right now, I might roll the car into a ditch.*

Her face warmed. *Are you texting and driving?*

*Never.*

Her smile grew too wide to contain. *Liar*, she typed. She was just about to hit SEND when a wooden ruler thwacked against the table.

She jumped out of her skin, the legs of her chair squealing across the floor. Dallas jolted as well, as if she had fallen asleep. Loren wouldn't be surprised; the witch was always tired these days.

*"Miss Calla!"* Professor Griffith barked.

Loren shut off the screen, dropped her phone on her lap, and looked up at the professor. "Yes?"

The professor was glaring down at her with a look that could cut through stone. "This is the third time in two days that I've caught you texting in my class. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Every student in the room, regardless of where they were sitting, managed to turn and stare at her. Until Darien had come along, she'd had no problem leaving her phone untouched for hours at a time. How quickly things had changed. But she figured it was to be expected when you were dating a hot-as-sin bounty hunter—especially one who'd pinned her to the wall of the shower before leaving Hell's Gate last night and fucked her breathless. She'd had a really good sleep after that.

Loren straightened her spine. "Umm." Words escaped her, and her phone was still buzzing on the lap of her skirt, making it impossible to think of an answer as her mind drifted to the new messages flashing across her screen. Was Darien saying more about her ass and how perfect he thought it was? Was he telling her all the filthy details about what he planned to do to her later? Maybe it involved the shower again and him standing dripping-wet before her—

Loren forced the sinfully delicious image out of her mind. "I'm sorry?" she tried.

Dallas snorted a laugh.

Professor Griffith's attention snapped to the witch, whose smile immediately faded. "I fail to see what's so funny, Miss Bright. If you continue to use enchanted stationary in my class, your chances of passing won't look any better than Miss Calla's."

The blood drained from Dallas's face. The last time Loren had seen the witch so pale was when Darien had brought them to the maze of abandoned warehouses and butcheries that made up the Umbra Forum, where they'd nearly been made into a meal.

That was one memory she could do without.

Flicking the mute button on the side of her phone before the professor could catch her, Loren jumped to Dallas's rescue. "I really am sorry, Professor. I swear it won't happen again."

Professor Griffith arched a slender brow. "It better not." She

pointed her ruler at Loren's half-hidden cell phone. "If I see you with that phone in your hand one more time, I will take it away. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Professor Griffith."

Magenta-painted lips formed a tight line. "You get one more chance, Miss Calla. After that, I won't be so forgiving." She rapped the table with the ruler again and then pointed it at Dallas, who visibly recoiled in her seat. "You too, Miss Bright. If you fail my class, I'll make sure not even the Red Baron will be able to bail you out." She strutted back to the front of the room to resume her lesson.

Loren didn't dare grab her phone for the rest of the class. She kept her arms crossed, resisting the urge to even glance at the screen that kept lighting up with incoming messages from Darien. Those last few minutes took forever to pass, but the bells above the academy finally chimed, the tuneless clanging filling the stone hallways and drifting through the open classroom door.

Dallas was one of the first students to stand, her books already stacked and in her arms. Loren pushed to her feet and hurried to gather up her own things, Sabrina doing the same beside her. Sab was the only person in the room who looked more disappointed than relieved that class was over. While the students of AA were always excited to practice magic, classes such as history tended not to be a favorite.

"*Really?*" Loren said to Dallas as they wove their way around tables and chairs. Ethan and his friends were wise to keep their distance, though Loren could feel them watching. "Enchanted stationary?" She had never heard of such a thing, but in a world of magic, there were few limits to what could be invented.

Dallas glanced over her shoulder, a smile playing on her lips—painted red with a glamour instead of makeup, as usual. Loren resisted the urge to give her hell for it. "My hand cramps up if I write for too long," Dallas said. "I got Maximus to grab some from the Umbra Forum. It does the writing *and* the listening for me." The fact that Dallas had to send a Darkslayer to one of the most dangerous places in the city to find the paper told Loren all she needed to know about it.

Sabrina gave Dallas a look of horror. "That sounds like a one-way ticket to a big fat F, Dal."

Dallas waved the conversation away. "Enough. I'm starving. Let's get to the dining hall before everyone beats us there."

"Actually," Loren piped up as they neared the door, "I'm spending lunch with Darien today." The students ahead of them shuffled out of the classroom, giving them a clear path into the hallway. "I'll see you guys next period."

Dallas threw her free hand in the air. "*Again?*"



But Loren was already halfway down the hallway, squishing through clusters of werewolves, vampires, and veneficae. "I forgot my medication, so he's bringing it to me!"

"You mean *this* medication?" Dallas called.

Loren turned to see Dallas making a crude gesture with her tongue and fist.

Her face turned beet-red. "*Dallas!*" she hissed.

Dallas barked a cackle that chased her down the torchlit hallway.

Loren skipped down the staircase and across the foyer, where she pushed through the towering arched doors of the academy. The rusted hinges emitted a deep groan as the doors lurched open.

It was still raining, which came as no surprise for this time of year, considering Januarius was Angelthene's wettest month. The sprawling academy grounds were drenched, the shaggy palm trees saturated and dripping. The humidity in the air weighed down her lungs and clung to her skin like an invisible coat.

Clutching her books and water bottle to her chest, she hurried down the stone steps, water splashing underfoot, and made her way across the lawn, the lush green grass flooded with rain. No other students were around—except for one.

Loren didn't know his name, and she hadn't seen him around campus until yesterday. He was sitting way off in the distance near the Old Hall, on a picnic table beneath the sparse shelter of a palm tree. His light-brown hair and clothes were soaked. He had no books with him, no bag. Nothing.

He was just watching her. He always watched her. Yesterday, she'd tried smiling at him, in case he was suffering from new-kid syndrome and was having no luck at making friends. But he hadn't smiled back.

Talk about creepy. It was like something she might see in a movie—the weird new kid that watches people from afar and never bothers to smile or speak.

Did he know something he shouldn't? She felt paranoid for even thinking it, but she couldn't erase the eerie feeling that overcame her every time she saw him, as if he hadn't come to the academy to learn, but to watch her. After the threats made against her that day in the limousine, she wouldn't be surprised if her movements were being monitored. Rules had been set, and the consequences for breaking them had been outlined very clearly.

If someone had been instructed to watch her, they were wasting their time. She had no intention of jeopardizing the safety of her friends and family by stepping out of line, so it was only a matter of time before they got bored and found something better to do.

Hopefully.

With a shudder, Loren looked away from the student and picked up

her pace, ascending the hill to the wrought-iron gates.

Darien was parked farther away from the gates than usual, and just as those gates swung open with a squeal, the rain picked up. The joyful chirping of birds enjoying an afternoon shower in the trees was barely audible over the thundering downpour.

Clutching her belongings with one arm, Loren held her other over her head and sprinted for the gleaming black sportscar, her polished shoes splashing in puddles. Water cascaded in small rivers alongside the curb and bled into gurgling storm drains. The sidewalk was sprinkled with palm tree fronds and the same blue jacaranda petals that dusted the roof and hood of Darien's car.

By the time she reached the passenger's-side door, her white button-up blouse and skirt were soaked, her hair flattened to her head. But she was still smiling as she swung open the door and launched herself onto the leather seat. Closing the door on the drumming rain, she shivered as the heat floating from the vents caressed her skin with an inviting kiss.

Loren was all too aware that Darien's full attention was on her as she dumped her books and stainless steel water bottle on the floor, the latter clanging as it tipped over and rolled under the seat. She drew her sopping hair over her shoulder and into her hands, and she began to twist it, wringing the water out onto the floor, as she slowly, *slowly* raised her eyes to Darien's face.

The Devil was watching her intently, a hint of a smile on his sculptured mouth, the look in his steel-blue eyes heavy and heated. His dark hair was styled back from his face, the strands damp from either the rain or a shower. His left wrist was slung over the steering wheel, the silver rings he wore on his index and middle fingers shining despite the lack of sunlight. The raindrops sparkling on the sleeve of his black leather jacket and the armrest of his door suggested he'd driven here with his window down.

"You know I always think you're beautiful, no matter what you're wearing," the Devil began, his deep, rich voice sending Loren's stomach into a dizzying flutter. "But I have to admit, watching your breasts bounce as you run toward me is truly a sight to behold." His gaze drifted down her body, over the shirt that was wet and clinging to her skin. He gave a low whistle of approval. "I can now die happy."

Loren grinned. "Hi."

"Hi." He mimicked her breathy tone, his eyes gleaming with amusement. She snickered, and he lifted a brow. "Where's my kiss?"

Loren tapped her lips with the tip of her index finger. "Right here. Come and get it."

Darien tsked. "Always making me work for it."

"Always."

But he closed the distance between them, took her face into his large hands, and kissed her deeply. Loren's own hands immediately went to his soft hair, pulling him closer to her. She breathed him in, the heady scent of him filling her lungs. His tongue swept into her mouth, brushing against hers in a way that made them both groan.

*I'm home, her heart sang. This is home.*

But Darien broke the kiss too soon. He pulled back just far enough to assess her, the space between his brows creasing with worry. "Are you feeling alright?" He was so close she could see every tone of blue in his eyes, every inky eyelash, every small scar flecking his skin.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"You're not fine," he accused, his rough thumbs tracing the curve of her jaw. "Baby, your heart is skipping beats. And don't try to tell me it's because I make you swoon like the guys in those tacky romance novels you read."

Loren fidgeted. He kept her face in his hands, thumbs still tracing her jaw, his touch leaving trails of heat on her skin. "They're not tacky," she said. "You just don't like their covers. You can't judge a book by the abs on its cover, Darien."

He rolled his eyes. "You're avoiding the question."

"Maybe that is the reason why." It wasn't a total lie, considering he *did* make her swoon like the guys in the books she read. Correction: *more* than the guys in the books she read. He was a book boyfriend dream-come-true. But that wasn't the reason for today's irregular heartbeat. At least, not the *whole* reason.

Darien seemed to really think about her answer for a moment, and then he declared, "You're a liar."

She waved a hand in dismissal. "Oh, who cares about my stupid heart?" She tried to close the distance between them, to taste that irresistible mouth of his again, but he held firm.

Darien was looking at her as if she had kicked a puppy. "I care, Loren. I care." He let go of her face so he could retrieve her medication from his jacket pocket. He tried to hand her the bottle, and when she didn't take it from him right away, he shook it in agitation, pills rattling.

Loren lifted a brow. "Are you pretending it's a tambourine like Mortifer the Menace?"

Darien shot her a stern look that would've sent her running for the hills when she'd first met him. "Loren, take one. Please."

With a sigh, Loren bent down to retrieve the water bottle from under her seat. She hated taking the medication on an empty stomach; it never failed to make her feel like throwing up. She supposed that was what she got for skipping out on proper meals.

When she straightened, water bottle in her grip, she flicked her

hair over a shoulder, the motion causing several raindrops to spatter Darien's face. She stifled a laugh as he wiped the water off his cheeks with one downward swipe of a tattooed hand.

She snatched her medication out of his grip. "Only because you asked so nicely." She pushed down on the cap and popped it off.

"So stubborn," he sighed, shaking his head. "You still test me like no one else, you know that?" His eyes softened as he watched her balance her water bottle between her knees and unscrew the lid. "But god, do I love you." The statement sent a rush of heat from her face to her collarbones.

She shook a pill into her palm and placed it on the center of her tongue. Just as she was about to take a swig of water, she paused, side-eyeing Darien. "Don't watch me, or I might choke."

Darien snorted a laugh, but he did as she'd requested and turned to stare out his rain-streaked window until she was done.

Her lunch break passed quickly, as time always did when she was with her favorite person. She spent most of it studying for the quiz she would be taking next period, cramming as much information into her brain as possible, while Darien spent most of that time trying to distract her. He also forced her to eat the leftovers he'd grabbed from the fridge at Hell's Gate, even going so far as to handfeed her until he was satisfied with how much she'd eaten. She had a feeling he was listening to see if her heart was still skipping beats.

When barely thirty minutes of her break remained, Loren set her pen in the crease of her notebook and sighed. "I think I'm going to fail."

Darien, who was tracing shapes and Ancient Reunerian letters into the fogged glass of his window, turned to face her, a cunning smile playing on the curve of his lips. He was up to no good, for sure. "You know what you need?"

Before she could speak, he snatched her book out of her grip, threw it onto the dash, and grabbed her around the waist. She let out a squeak of surprise and took care to duck her head as he pulled her out of her seat and into his lap. She banged her knee on the gearshift and the steering wheel, nearly elbowing Darien in the face, her legs tangling with his.

He gave a low grunt and ducked his head to the left, narrowly avoiding another elbow. "I can't tell if you're trying to gouge my eye out or knee me in the balls."

"I'm *trying* to—" She bumped something with her arm, and the turn signal began to tick. The windshield wipers came on, sliding back and forth across the glass with a squeal.

A low laugh slipped out of Darien's lips. It was her favorite sound in the world, even when she was fighting for her life in a cramped car.

Finally, she managed to maneuver her body until she was straddling him, her knees braced on either side of his muscular thighs, and she felt proud of herself for not gouging out his eyes *or* kneeling him in the balls.

Loren's heart was pounding, a frantic rhythm she knew Darien could hear. Desire pooled in her core, sending a spear of heat right down to her toes. He seemed to like having her on top of him; he'd chosen this position nearly every day since their first time. Now that Darien had turned off the wipers and the turn signal, the car was quiet, the dreamlike reality of being this close to him surrounding her like a warm hug. He was looking up at her, one corner of his mouth twitching with amusement, the shallow dimple in his cheek fluttering.

"You were saying?" she prompted softly, tracing the shape of his lips with her index finger. She would never get tired of the way he looked; his features were flawless, as if an artist of the highest talent had carved him from marble. She pressed a kiss to his mouth and whispered against his skin, "You still haven't told me what it is that I need."

With his lips grazing hers, she could feel the playful smile spreading across his face. "A stress reliever." He snaked his hand between her thighs and up her skirt, the movement so sudden and unexpected that her stomach did a backflip. While the steel of his rings was cold on her skin, the heat from his hand was inviting—a flame she felt all over. "And I've got just the thing." He nipped at her bottom lip and hiked up her skirt, exposing her backside to the cool air, and pushed her red thong—made of barely-there lace—to one side.

"*Darien!*" she hissed. Reality hit her like a slap to the face as she realized he had much more than kissing in mind. This time, when her stomach dipped, it was for an entirely different reason. "We *can't*." She looked over her shoulder at the academy. Through the rain, the building was barely visible, but still far too close for comfort. The professors, the other students... What if someone saw them? "This is so bad." She knew she shouldn't be surprised; he had a taste for all things scandalous.

"Look at me," Darien commanded. She did as she was told, tearing her wide-eyed gaze off the school, as he began to unbutton her shirt.

He undid the first one with his teeth. She wasn't sure how, but there didn't seem to be a thing he wasn't good at. As the second button sprang open, courtesy of his deft fingers this time, his mouth brushed across the skin below her jaw. She shivered as his hands moved lower, slowly undoing the buttons, one by one, drawing out each movement in a way that left her whole body quivering with need.

When the last button sprang free, he reached around her and unclasped her bra. And then he removed the bra *and* her shirt. Eyes on her, he threw them onto the passenger's seat.

"What if we get caught?" Loren barely finished her question as Darien bent his head and drew her left nipple into his mouth, his tongue teasing the sensitive skin. His right hand returned to the space between her thighs—

A gasp floated off her lips as he began to play with her clit. His fingers, so rough and warm, rubbed her in the best way. The right amount of friction, the right pace.

"You're worrying too much, sweetheart," Darien said. She nearly groaned, the precision of his movements threatening to push her straight to climax. He pressed a kiss to the skin between her breasts, tongue sweeping out to taste her. The way he touched her, the way he tasted her, the way he looked at her, was like a worshipping of her body. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, but she couldn't get enough of him either. "Besides," Darien continued with a wicked smile, breath tickling her skin, "I had Mortifer cloak the car with concealment spells before I left, as a little favor for stealing your medication."

"How long do they last?" The words were breathy, and she was already so wet for him, his fingers slick as they slid up and down, up and down, teasing her entrance and circling her clit. Oh, it was so good. The effect he had on her was dizzying; she could barely think. "An hour?"

"We don't need an hour, Lola. Only three minutes." He winked up at her, that adorable dimple reappearing.

Three minutes—*right*. He could last for so long she sometimes had trouble walking afterward. "Says the man who kept me up till five a.m. last weekend—" She barely got the last word out, as he abruptly grew serious, his carnal focus entirely on her, and pushed a finger inside her.

She *did* groan this time, the sound filling the car. He added another finger while his other hand cupped her ass, fingertips digging in possessively. She loved when he handled her like this.

It didn't take long for her rational thoughts to cloud over with lust, and she willingly spiraled into it with every stroke of Darien's hand. As he played with her, he watched her with a predator's focus, the heat of his stare like a fire she would willingly throw herself into.

"Spread your legs a little for me, sweetheart," Darien told her. She did, shuddering with pleasure at the feel of the new angle. "There you go. Just like that." He slapped her ass, making her gasp, and squeezed. "You're so wet, Loren. You're going to feel so good on my cock." His words dried out her mouth, while another part of her got even wetter,

her stomach tightening with a fresh wave of arousal.

"I want it," she panted. She clung to him, fingernails clawing his shoulders. He was so close, she could feel him everywhere, but it wasn't close enough, and she wanted him so badly. "Give it to me."

A dark smile teased his mouth. "Not yet."

He brought his fingers out to swirl her wetness around her clit, the sensations causing her thighs to clamp around his hand.

Her breathing hitched, her pleasure building at a staggering pace. She tried grinding on his cock, but it was difficult to do from this angle.

That hand on her ass tightened, stilling her movements, holding her away from what she wanted. "What did I just say?" Darien berated, his words a low growl. He pushed two fingers back in, right up to the knuckles. "Fuck, you're tight." The approval in his husky tone had her insides clenching around his fingers.

A whimper slipped through her lips. "Darien, please—"

"I know, baby. I'll let you ride my cock once I've had my fun with your pretty little pussy." He drew her lower lip into his mouth and sucked on it, teeth grazing. When he let go, he stayed close enough to breathe her air, that hand pumping into her relentlessly, the friction from his touch turning her body into a living flame. "How does that sound?"

"Good." The word was barely a whisper.

He nipped at her lip again. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

His thumb pressed even harder into her clit, building up the pressure, making her squirm in his lap. Her nipples were so hard they felt raw.

Every kiss Darien left on her body tripled her want. Her *need*. Although a part of her still worried about being caught, she found that she liked it—the thrill. Knowing her school was right there, and she was in here, the hand of a Devil between her thighs, turned her on, her need for him too great to contain.

"You want to come, baby?" Darien's question was voiced so roughly and so deeply, she felt it in her belly.

"Yes," she gasped. Those fingers moved faster, sliding in and out of her, that friction pushing her pleasure closer, the promise of release making her vision shimmer at the edges. "God, yes."

With a rocking of her hips, she chased her orgasm to his rhythm, desperate to come, her breathy moans the only sound in the car. She clung to the worn leather of his jacket with one hand, zipper digging into her palm, the other grasping the back of his neck, her thumb grazing the Devil's tattoo below his ear.

Her orgasm was so close, her legs were jerking from the staggering

force of it. "Don't stop—"

He covered her mouth with his, the kiss hungry and claiming as he swallowed her cries, not breaking it until all the breath was out of her lungs. Her pulse pounded everywhere, but mostly between her legs, where his hand moved with wicked precision.

"So beautiful," he breathed, a sound of approval climbing up his throat. That hand pumped into her harder. Faster. She fell into him from the sheer force of his movements, her breasts flattening against his chest, her mouth once again finding his. His other hand went to the back of her head, grabbing a fistful of her hair and tugging it back. "Come on, sweetheart," he growled, breath sweeping across her mouth. "Let me feel that tight pussy come around my fingers, and maybe I won't tell your professors what a naughty little fucking brat you are." He curled his fingers inside her, just a little, hitting that spot

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Pleasure exploded through her, every muscle going taut as she came with a high cry. Her thighs pressed together with her release, trapping his hand between them, her whole body quivering in his lap. "Oh god." She could feel her inner muscles squeezing his fingers, so tight he could hardly move them, but it only turned her on more, especially when he kept going, the area so sensitive she almost had to beg him to stop.

"Fuck yes." He tightened his fist in her hair and covered her mouth with his, swallowing her new cries as she rocked into his hand, again and again. He carried her through her orgasm, right to the very end of it, his movements only slowing when hers did.

When she broke the kiss, gasping for air, heart galloping in her chest, she looked at Darien, only to find that he was already staring at her, that gaze of his devouring.

"You dirty girl," he accused, a dark and sinful smile creeping across his mouth. "Getting fucked right in front of your school."

"That was your idea," she panted.

"It was, wasn't it?" He took his hand out from under her skirt, the sudden absence of his touch making her whimper and bite her lip.

And then, slowly, his gaze holding hers the whole time, he brought that hand up to his mouth...and sucked on his fingers.

A low groan rose in his throat. "I fucking love how you taste." And just like that, she was wet all over again.

"I need you," she breathed, reaching down between their bodies to palm his hard cock through his pants.

The stroking of her hand caused him to draw a hiss in through his teeth. He swore, trembling from the contact—just as she too was trembling. The way he bit his lip, his head tipping back against the seat, was quite possibly the single hottest thing she'd ever seen.



The tension between them was so thick she could feel it, like the energy that builds in the air before a lightning strike.

When he spoke, his voice was dark and rich as caramel. "Would you like to get fucked, Miss Loren?"

Her swallow was audible. "Yes, please."

The smile he gave her was one of a true devil. "Such a polite little thing. I love it." He spanked her ass. "Take off the thong."

He began to undo his belt. Just as she was reaching up under her skirt to do as she was told, something over his shoulder caught her eye.

That haze of lust dissipated, and her blood went cold.

She blinked, squinting through the condensation fogging up the windows. Silvery sheets of rain still fell from a low, full-bellied sky, making it nearly impossible to see. But...

"Holy crap," she breathed. There was a squad car parked behind them, nearly bumper to bumper. How long had it been there? "There's a peace officer behind us."

Steadying her with a hand on her waist, Darien turned to look out the back window. After a moment, he said, "Who cares?" He turned back around and tugged on the string of her thong. "Get those panties off. They can't see us."

"I care!" Loren hissed. "What if they come up to the car?"

"Then I'll deal with it." He finished undoing his pants and grabbed her by the chin. "Eyes on me."

Screw it. She wanted him too badly to care anymore.

But then the driver's-side door of the squad car swung open. Loren felt the blood drain from her face as a warlock peace officer, the silver rings around his pupils reflecting like mirrors, stepped out into the rain.

Darien Cassel was pissed.

What lousy timing for this pinhead to show up. The guy, clearly having nothing better to do, had probably run his plate and decided to give him a hard time for parking so close to AA. Prestigious academies like this one took extra care in keeping their students safe, and while this might seem like a good thing, considering Loren was one of those students, an abundance of bullies roamed the property, their actions flying under the headmaster's radar, thanks to their academic successes and overprivileged parents.

Bullies who got off on targeting humans. Beautiful blonde humans who kept to themselves and had put up with the mistreatment for way too fucking long.

If it were up to Darien, and if it weren't for Loren begging him not to, he would've already put an end to that garbage by holding those assholes' heads under the surface of the academy pool, just long enough to make them remember how lucky they were to be alive—and just long enough for them to realize whose woman they'd made the mistake of fucking with.

Darien forced himself to focus on the problem at hand. He was used to dealing with guys like this warlock prick sauntering up to the car. He would get rid of him as fast as he could so he could get back to taking care of his girl in more ways than one.

He took another drag on the cigar Max had left in his car, letting the potent, velvet smoke fill his mouth and lungs. And then he blew it back out and dispersed the cloud with a wave of his hand while Loren finished fastening the buttons on her shirt. He would have to thank Max for always leaving these things lying around. They didn't taste too bad. Dark and intense, with earthy undertones that relaxed his mind and muscles instantly.

Mmm...not bad at all.

*Hah.* Max wouldn't like the sound of that. Maybe he shouldn't tell him, or he might make a point of hiding them from now on. Of all his belongings, there were two things Max wasn't willing to share: weapons and cigars.

The officer stopped at the driver's-side door, shifted his weight to one leg, and shoved his gloved thumbs through his beltloops.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Darien flicked the button on the door. The tinted glass lowered with a muffled groan, and cool air

scented with flowers swept into the car, rustling his hair and the pages of the notebook Loren held open on her lap. Without the window and the spells to block outside noise, the drumming of the rain swelled to a steady roar. Cigar smoke billowed out of the car in an opaque cloud, hopefully disguising the scent of what they had been doing a moment ago...what the officer had so thoughtlessly interrupted.

Loren coughed once with her mouth closed.

"Afternoon, folks." The officer's eyes flicked to Loren for a fraction of a second before returning to Darien, his attention lingering on the small tattoo—no bigger than a coin—of the horned letter S just below his ear. Judging from the look on the officer's face, he didn't expect to find a human girl in a Darkslayer's car. His jaw worked as he chewed the wad of gum in his mouth. "You Darien Cassel?"

Darien rested his hand on the steering wheel, cigar burning between his index and middle fingers. "Depends on why you're asking."

The officer gave him a humorless smile. "I'm going to need you to come down to the station."

Darien sensed Loren tensing in her seat, but he kept his focus on the officer. "Am I being arrested?"

"Not if you cooperate."

"What's going on, Officer?" Loren leaned forward to make eye contact with the prick. "I don't see what the big deal is. He's just helping me study." In the corner of his vision, Darien saw her gesture to the book spread open on her folded legs—the gorgeous legs that had been braced on either side of his own minutes ago.

Fuck this guy for wrecking this hour.

The officer looked at her for a beat longer than Darien preferred, taking in every inch of her as if she were an object, not a person. The cigar nearly crumbled to a pulp in his hand as his grip on it tightened, his other fingers curling around the steering wheel so hard the leather groaned.

"Everything's fine," the warlock told her. "I just need to have a word with Mister Cassel here."

Darien looked him over. He had to give the guy credit for not shrinking under his stare—the stare that made most people scamper away with their tail between their legs. But as useless as Angelthere's law enforcement may be, anyone who trained for the job had to have balls of steel if they wanted to last so much as a day on the clock.

Darien flicked open the ashtray and ground the smouldering end of the cigar into the ashes. "Give us a minute," he told the officer without looking at him.

The officer nodded, and he was about to walk away when he paused and bent back down to look in the car. He gave Loren a little

smile that was nothing short of condescending. "I bet you were able to get a lot of studying done with your book upside down."

Darien's head snapped up, his cold gaze zeroing in on the officer. Loren's heartbeat picked up to a sprint, the sound filling the car. He didn't need to look at her to know she was staring at the officer, a deer caught in headlights.

The officer gave her a wink. "Just saying." When he looked at Darien, a taunting grin spread across his face, the gum in his mouth showing.

"If you're smart," Darien began in a low voice, "you'll walk your smug ass back to your car. I've been in my line of work long enough to know what I can get away with, so don't fucking test me."

A cold laugh rose in the warlock's throat. "So the rumors weren't lying. Good to know." He patted the inside of the window with two firm, prompting slaps. "Make it quick." He walked back to his car before Darien could say anything else.

Or before he could pull the officer through the window and crack his thick skull open on the gearshift.

Darien took a steadying breath and turned in his seat to face Loren, who was watching him with a pout on her face, the space between her eyebrows scrunched up.

"What does he want?" she whispered.

He flicked the button on the window, and the water-streaked glass rolled back up with a squeak. "I don't know." He jerked his chin at the academy. "Go back inside, sweetheart, and I'll see you later. Okay?"

Loren slapped her book shut. "Okay." Her frown had deepened, and pink dusted her ivory skin. Seeing her upset kindled emotions in him that he was still getting used to, still figuring out how to identify.

"Loren," Darien said softly. With reluctance, she lifted her eyes to his face. "Everything will be fine, I promise."

Those big eyes searched his face. He didn't look away from her—not once. Anything she needed from him, anything to make her feel okay about this situation, he would give it to her, even if it was all the time in the universe. Fuck the warlock and whatever he wanted. He'd break off the gearshift and shove it up the guy's ass if it would make Loren happy.

Darien nearly laughed. That would be a sight to see.

"Okay." Loren sighed again, her slender shoulders sinking with the exhalation. She gathered up her things, taking care to keep them from slipping out of her arms as she leaned across the car, her ocean-blue eyes—framed in thick, dark lashes—fixed on his mouth. "Thanks for the ride," she teased.

Darien met her halfway and stole the breath from her lungs with a deep kiss. His hand came around to the back of her head, her sun-

bright hair soft under his palm. He felt her tremble against him as he parted her heart-shaped lips with his tongue. When she whimpered into his mouth—a breathy sound that reminded him of the little noises she made when they were fucking—a groan climbed up his own throat, his hand tightening into a fist in her hair. The way her tongue teased his, the stud in the center rubbing in a way that promised pure ecstasy on a much more sensitive body part, made him hard all over again.

When he broke the kiss, they were both out of breath. The tension between them had returned, somehow stronger than before. He couldn't wait until they were alone again, so he could bury himself in her and forget about the world for a while.

She pressed her forehead against his and closed her eyes. "Later, then," she whispered, her breath caressing his mouth.

"Later." He loosened the hand in her hair and kissed the tip of her nose. He hated how cold he felt when she pulled away from him, the space between them expanding. Sometimes, it was so unbearable it hurt like a knife piercing his heart. She was his sun, his silver lining, and when she wasn't around, everything in his life grew darker. Colorless and cold.

Loren reached for the door handle and pulled it open. She carefully balanced her books in her arms as she stepped out into the rain that was finally dying down to a mist.

She was about to close the door when she stopped. "Oh, I almost forgot." Darien watched as she fumbled around in her purse. When she found what she was looking for, she bent down to see him in the car. "I made this for you." She handed him a keychain.

Darien held it up between his thumb and forefinger. Attached to the gold chain was a glass dome, no bigger than a quail's egg. Inside the dome sat a tiny succulent, sparkles floating around it like fireflies.

"It's real," Loren said. "Mordred and Penny charmed it for me. It won't die unless the glass breaks."

Darien smiled. "Thank you, sweetheart." She was always making things these days; natural candles, body lotions, shower gels, and now keychains. He pinched the clasp open and attached the dome to the rest of his keys.

She returned his smile with a ducking of her head. "Will you go with me to my dad's tomorrow night?"

"Of course, Loren. Of course I'll go with you. You don't even have to ask me that."

She smiled, reaching for him with one hand, her books nearly toppling out of her other arm. He took her small fingers and gave them a gentle squeeze.

"See you after school." She blew him a kiss and shut the door.

Darien waited until she was safely through the gates before he lowered the emergency brake and pushed the gearshift into drive.

In the rear-view mirror, he saw the prick of an officer watching the car with a cold smirk, as if he could see right through the concealment spells. At least he wasn't watching Loren.

What Darien wouldn't give to smack that smirk off his face. If he *were* watching Loren, he would've done much worse than smack him.

Darien was about to drive away when he paused, his attention returning to Loren, just like always.

He was fucking gaga for her. He loved watching her walk, loved the shape of her tight, perfect ass in anything she was wearing. Especially skirts. What a knockout he'd ended up with.

As he watched her, he got an idea. A wicked one that made his blood electrify in his veins.

He closed his eyes. As he stirred his magic awake, the whites and irises were engulfed by the black of the Sight. He coaxed his power up to the surface of his mind, eyelids flying back open as he unleashed the force of it on his girlfriend.

Even from this far away, he could see Loren's legs shake from the unbridled pleasure he threw onto her. Her knees buckled, and she slipped to the grass, barely catching herself before she could topple down the hill. Darien was impressed that she managed not to drop anything or fall flat to the ground, though her body visibly trembled. He kept his magic going until he was certain she'd fully climaxed before he reined it in, stamping it down to its place of rest.

An unholy grin spread across his face.

He'd wanted to do that since that night in the dining room all those months ago. Back when they'd barely known a thing about each other, but had wanted to get into each other's pants all the same.

Even through the rain and the concealment spells on the car, Loren's eyes still managed to find his. Her face was red with embarrassment, and her eyes brimmed with accusations—and a threat that he would hear about this later.

He was already looking forward to *later*.

Darien gave a dark laugh as he hit the accelerator and peeled out onto the street.

—

When the officer had told Darien to follow him to the precinct, the last place he'd expected to end up was at the headquarters of the Magical Protections Unit.

Darien had toyed with the warlock for a while, seeing how well his wimpy cruiser could keep up with him while maneuvering traffic.

After easing off the accelerator, the warlock had still barely managed to get in front of him, but once he had, Darien had allowed him to lead the way through Angelthene's North End, down six-lane highways lined with towering palm trees, flashy billboards, and flickering neon signs—and had driven right past the precinct. Although he was suspicious, Darien had continued to follow him, more out of curiosity than anything.

And the temptation that if the bastard were to try anything stupid, he'd get to find out what it felt like to bash his skull open after all.

Now, as the officer led the way through the immaculate headquarters of the MPU, around the desks that were occupied with people who sipped on coffee and jabbered into phones, Darien ignored the many probing gazes that tracked his every step.

The officer stopped at a closed door and gestured for Darien to open it. "After you," the warlock drawled, a smug, infuriating smile plastered to his face.

Darien stifled the urge to punch his teeth down his throat. Now wasn't the time, and it certainly wasn't the place either. Though he might've walked a little closer to the officer than necessary as he passed him, taking delight in the way the warlock rocked back on his heels, clearly deciding whether the threat Darien posed was great enough to warrant sacrificing his pride by backing away.

It was Darien's turn to smirk as he swung open the door and walked into the small office.

The person sitting behind the desk—a male warlock in his early thirties, with deeply suntanned skin, a trimmed beard, and short dark hair—made him pause.

Darien gave one slow blink, a muscle feathering in his jaw. The man promptly ended the call he was on, mumbling to the person on the other end that he would call them back, and hung up the landline.

"Finn fucking Solace." Darien was just closing the door behind him when the detective spoke.

"Keep the door open—"

"Nah, I don't think so." Darien slammed the door in the face of the officer who was lingering outside, looking like he had no idea what to do. Darien strode to the interior window that gave him a clear view of the people sitting at their cozy little desks, every single one of those people peering at him with wide, terrified eyes, and proceeded to pull down the blinds and slant them shut. "Clearly, it was your goal to try to intimidate me by sending one of your boys to find me, so I think it's only fair that I intimidate you in return."

He faced Finn, giving him an opportunity to argue. The only sound in the room was the swaying tassels jingling against the aluminum blinds. When Finn didn't say anything, Darien strode to the polished

mahogany desk and plunked down in the chair across from him. He leaned back, put his feet up on the desk, and crossed one ankle over the other.

Finn's attention went to the mud that was caked to the soles of his black combat boots. Darien swore the guy's eye twitched. "Get your feet off my desk, Cassel."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, it's far too comfortable."

Finn blew out a sigh through his nose and laced his fingers on the desk. "I was hoping we could've had a civil conversation—"

"You should've thought that through before sending a peace officer to track me down at my girl's school and threaten to arrest me." Darien leveled him with an icy stare. "You could've just called."

Finn's brows shot up. "No offense, but the number of times you've answered your phone are too few and far between for that offer to sound enticing." Irritation flickered across his features, accentuating the frown lines framing his mouth. "Did you know your voicemail is always full, or do you just not bother to delete your messages?" Darien didn't bother to listen to them either, but he wasn't here to discuss that.

"What do you want, Finn?"

The detective considered his question, a muscle in his jaw twitching as his eyes once again flicked to Darien's filthy boots, so close to his oh-so-valuable paperwork. "There's a new Head Detective in town," Finn began, his voice a bass rumble. "Where he comes from, Darkslayers don't exist. He has plans to stamp them out in Angelthene, too."

"I'm quaking in my boots."

"This isn't a joke, Cassel. He has the means to take you and your Devils down, and he won't hesitate to do it. You're number one on his list, followed closely by Delaney and his Reapers."

Finn had Darien's full attention now, if only because he was curious to know what this was all about, and why the new head honcho of the MPU was more concerned with taking down Darkslayers than the thugs and thieves that stirred up unrest in the city's many districts. If the law was smart, they worked *with* Darkslayers, not against them. It sounded like this guy was off to a real bad start.

"I have a business proposition for you," Finn began.

Darien allowed for a beat of silence. "I'm listening."

"Detective Nolan wants to take down Angelthene's illegal arms trade even more than he wants to take down people like you. I convinced him it would be worth our time to approach you with an offer that would not only help you, but would also help us. As I'm sure you are aware, Randal didn't just have a large role to play in the



routes the dealers use to smuggle the weapons into the city, but he was also a major negotiator with the clients the dealers have had decades' long relationships with. And with Randal now gone, the assumption is that his former responsibilities will fall to you." He nodded in Darien's direction, not seeming to notice how hard Darien was gripping the armrests of his chair, how threatening the look in his eyes had become. They were half a second from turning black—he could feel it. Oblivious, Finn concluded, "His successor in every regard."

Leaning forward in his seat, the anger inside him a snake coiled to strike, Darien bared his teeth. "I want nothing to do with my father's throne of shit."

"That's fine." Finn held up his hands. "But if you change your mind, and if you accept my proposition—"

"That's a massive *if*, Finn."

"You'll have to pretend that you want every bit of that throne. I'm asking—*begging* you to consider my offer. If you can get in close enough to get us some names and locations, and we can take these sons of bitches down, you and your Devils will be in the clear. I give you my word."

"And how do you propose I do that? Considering Randal's dead, I wouldn't be surprised if someone's already managed to steal his title." It had been on his mind since Randal died, but the last thing he'd wanted was to get into a new mess, especially when he'd just got out of one.

And especially when he'd never been happier in all his life. Why would he want to invite trouble to his door when he now had Loren to consider? He'd made a promise to keep her safe, and that promise would last for as long as she lived. The decisions he made affected them both now, and he would make them wisely.

"You would've heard by now, no?" Finn gave him an incredulous look. "*You*—Darien Cassel. I mean, come on." He leaned back in his seat and crossed an ankle over a knee. "Nothing happens in this city without you hearing about it."

"You flatter me." Darien forced himself to relax in the seat. He sighed...drummed the armrests...looked about the room. Eventually, the Surge stopped knocking, leaving him safe for a little while longer, the colors of auras and energies fading into regular vision. "Does this have anything to do with the murders caused by Blood Staves?"

The look shining in Finn's eyes suggested he was impressed by the question. "It has everything to do with the murders caused by Blood Staves. We might've put Cain Nash behind bars with your help, but after some recent events, we've realized we might've been chasing after the wrong players in this game."

Darien made a sound of agreement in his throat. He always knew going after someone like Cain wouldn't fix the problems the law enforcement wanted to fix. Cain was only one of many people who brought danger to Angelthene's streets. You couldn't take out a measly pawn and expect the king and queen to fall too.

Finn was watching him. Waiting.

Darien watched him back.

"I'm doing this because I like you, Cassel," Finn said. "Even though you're a pain in my ass, and you should be behind bars too, I like you, and you have a lot to offer this city that you can't give if you're locked up in Blackwater."

Darien had been inside the walls of the twin prisons known as Blackwater and Darkwater Penitentiary before, but only as a visitor. It was hell on earth, a cold and hostile facility where the worst of the worst were sentenced to rot. A place where his father had served time on multiple occasions, only to be let off far too easily, slipping through the many cracks of the unjust system. Blackwater was the worse of the two; it was more like one big fighting ring, a place that just might kill you before you had a chance to face execution.

As Darien thought everything through, he scanned the office: the shelves that were filled with plaques and books that looked like the pages had never been cracked open; the collection of framed photographs on the desk; the black filing cabinet that was so pristine there wasn't a single fingerprint marring its surface.

"This *Detective Nolan*...", Darien began, looking back at Finn to see that he was still watching him. "Where is he? Maybe he'd like to speak to me himself."

"He's out today."

"Figures," Darien muttered. "How serious is he?"

"I've never met a more serious guy in my life, let me tell you that. He isn't messing around." Finn leaned forward in his seat again, his expression all business. He was a big fucker, the scars on his knuckles and palms suggesting he was one of the few people in this line of work who was actually willing to get his hands dirty. "If you do this, you're going to need help. Who do you have that would side with you if—and I'm saying *if*, so don't get your back up here—you took Randal Slade's place?" Before Darien could object to the question, he added, "Just enlighten me for a minute, will you?"

Darien sighed. "All right, fine. I'll enlighten you." He drummed the armrests of his chair again, his eyes flicking to the ceiling. The Surge was threatening to come back. "The Vipers and the Angels of Death are some of the few people I call friends. They'd back me up on just about anything. I wouldn't exactly call anyone from the other circles a friend, though they're not all my enemies either."

"It's a good start." Finn thought it through for a moment, rubbing the dark stubble on his chin. Darien could practically see the gears turning in his head, and because of this, he felt them turning in his own. Something told him he wouldn't like where this was going. And he was correct in thinking so as Finn began, "You know... I think if you were to speak to Malakai—"

"No," Darien bit out. The armrests of his chair crackled in protest as his fingers curled into the leather, squeezing tight.

"Just listen."

"No, *you* listen," Darien snapped. Finn sat up straighter, but he wisely kept his mouth shut as Darien went on to say, "Considering I killed two Reapers with no explanation as to why, Malakai will be more likely to throw hands than he will to listen to me." To be completely honest, Darien was surprised Malakai hadn't come for his neck yet. And it wasn't just the head of Tyson Geller that Malakai cared about. It was the other guy, Liam, who was with Tyson that night outside of Blackbird—a Reaper Darien hadn't recognized at the time. When a Darkslayer got killed, their circle came for the person who pulled the trigger. Killing Tyson and the other guy outside of Blackbird 88 Above had been an act of defense, it was true. But Malakai didn't know that.

Usually, something like this wouldn't bother Darien so much. He'd been handling Malakai—and people who were far more dangerous than him—for a long time. But since he'd started dating Loren, since she'd started sleeping under his roof...

He wouldn't risk it. It was better to keep people like Malakai at a distance, where he couldn't find out about Loren and decide to retaliate by targeting her.

"So, let him get it out of his system," Finn suggested, his husky voice cutting into the bubble of bone-deep rage that had enveloped him. "Make him an offer he can't refuse. If you don't get the Reapers on your side, people like Lionel and Channary will be challenging your claim in no time. You *need* him for an ally, Darien, or this isn't going to work—"

"I've heard enough." Darien shoved away from the desk and got to his feet. His hands were beginning to tremble, and the Sight was threatening to swallow his vision again. His pathetic attempt at quitting smoking—an attempt he'd committed to only yesterday—was making it even harder to keep the Surge at bay. The cigar he'd smoked outside of AA had only caused his need for nicotine to resurface with a vengeance.

Finn made to stand. "Hold on just a second."

But Darien was already across the room. "I don't need you talking to me as if I've already agreed to this bullshit plan."

“Cassel—”

“I’ll think about it.” He swung open the door, denting the drywall with the handle. “And the next time you need something, you will call or text me like a normal person instead of sending one of your dogs to track me down.”

The warlock who’d led him here was still lingering outside the door, and he straightened from the wall he was leaning against as Darien pinned him with a cold stare.

“And *you*,” Darien snarled, pointing a finger at his face. His voice was so fierce, he drew the attention of every person in the area. For the first time all day, the warlock had the wits to look worried as Darien bore down on him. “Don’t ever look at or speak to my girl again, or I’ll carve your eyes and tongue out of your head.”

—

Darien wasn’t sure how he made it through the sprawling headquarters of the MPU without stopping to wring the blood out of someone’s neck, but the next thing he knew, he was in the parking lot.

It was still pissing down rain, as if the ground wasn’t wet enough. Stormy weather was usually his favorite, but today was the first heavy rainfall they’d had in weeks, and already the drains were flooded with a soup of debris, animal waste, and litter. Combined with the heavy humidity, it only made the urban funk of Angelthene worse than usual, even in a district as clean as this one.

Jaw clenched, temples throbbing, Darien stalked over to where he’d parked his car, right at the very end of a line of cruisers and motorcycles that belonged to law enforcement and the MPU, pristine paint streaked with water.

He slumped against the driver’s door and fished a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket—the cigarettes he’d stopped to buy on his way here, forcing the disgruntled peace officer to wait for him outside.

He took a minute to breathe deeply, to listen to the sound of the palm trees swaying in the breeze and the cars zipping past on the highway not far from where he stood. The last thing he needed right now was a full-blown Surge, especially this early in the day. And especially when there was a target he needed to track down before his deadline at midnight. He would never make it in time if he had to stop at an underground fighting ring to wrangle his inner turmoil.

What a mess of a day. Was it too much to ask for life to be normal for just a *little* while longer before another, more irritating pile of shit hit the fan? After everything that happened on Kalendae...after he’d experienced firsthand what it felt like to be alive when his family was

dead...when *he* himself had died...

A break—they couldn't catch a break.

He took out a cigarette and placed it between his lips, and he was just about to spark his lighter when a familiar face made him freeze.

Malakai Delaney was walking out the doors of the building. Malakai. Fucking. Delaney. What were the odds of that? The last person he'd expected to run into was the same asshole he'd just been arguing about in Solace's office. Sometimes, for a city with a population of over eight million, it felt horribly small here. If Malakai saw him, Darien wasn't sure if they'd both wind up dead or in holding cells by the time they were through with each other.

As bad as he knew it would be to indulge in this violent fantasy, a fight would do him some good right about now. And if there was anyone in this city who was a worthy opponent, it was this asshole.

Darien found the corners of his lips tipping up. What he wouldn't give to realign this guy's nose and jaw. But as Darien continued to study Malakai, he realized someone had already beat him to the punch.

With his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black leather jacket, and his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, the leader of the Reapers looked a little worse for wear. There was a limp in his step, and dried blood was caked on his left eyebrow and lower lip. His shoulders were hunched, and his black steel-toe boots were untied, the laces dragging through mud puddles. From what Darien could see of his shirt through his unzipped jacket, it was filthy and torn in more places than one. So were his jeans, as if a wild animal had ripped into him.

Darien snorted a laugh. What a sight that would've been.

Strutting at Malakai's side in chunky platform sneakers was a petite female with purplish-blond hair that fell to her hips, a leather skirt and crop-top, and fishnets that made her moon-pale legs look like they were glowing. She wore a skull-print hoodie that had to be at least two sizes too big for her, and around her throat was a black necklace that looked more like a dog collar.

Jewels Delaney, Malakai's sister. Judging from the look on her face, and the way she was waving her hands in the air dramatically while she spoke, she was giving him shit for something. Malakai was too distracted to notice Darien as they made their way to a flashy motorcycle, the sides painted with the Reapers' logo.

When they reached the bike, Malakai got on first, shaking his shoulder-length hair out of his face as he handed Jewels the only available helmet. She put it on and swung her leg over the bike to perch on the seat behind her brother. She was still giving him hell as she buckled and tightened the straps on the helmet, and Darien had to admit it was amusing to see her smack the back of her brother's head

with an open palm, and even more entertaining to see Malakai shrink under the punishment, looking more like a little boy getting scolded than a twenty-six-year-old man who slit throats for a living.

The engine rumbled to life, and they sped away in a flash, Malakai refusing to let up on the accelerator until the whole city could hear that blasted motorcycle ripping through the streets.

Gritting his teeth, Darien shoved a finger into an ear, holding it there until the bike was far enough away that the sound of it stopped grating on his nerves. With a shake of his head, he returned to sparking the cigarette.

“You look like you could use a drink,” said a husky male voice.

Blowing out a breath of rippling smoke, Darien turned to see an Angel of Death approaching, ebony wings tucked in tight behind him.

Whenever Darien saw Dominic Valencia, the Angel wasn’t usually dressed in blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and sneakers—and he usually wasn’t looking like a bus had run him over approximately ten times. His eyes were bloodshot, the purple half-moons ringing the skin underneath suggesting he hadn’t slept a wink last night. There was a gash in his left eyebrow, and dark bruises were scattered across his cheekbones and the column of his throat. He looked just as rough as Malakai, which made Darien realize it likely wasn’t a coincidence that the two of them were here at the same time.

Dominic liked to fight, which was why Darien didn’t feel guilty for smirking as he took in his friend’s battered appearance. Darien hadn’t seen Dom this messed up since their high school days, when they used to beat the living daylights out of the students they didn’t get along with. They didn’t always win, but they always had fun.

Darien’s lips twitched with a smile. “Are we having a Darkslayer reunion or something?”

The Angel grinned, his teeth a bright white against brown skin. “I take it you saw Malakai.”

“Sure did. And his cryptic little sister, too.”

Dominic laughed.

Taking another drag on the cigarette, Darien jerked his chin at the bruises on Dom’s throat. “You look like you got choked.”

“I did, and it wasn’t the fun kind.” Dom answered Darien’s growing smile with one of his own. “That’s actually why I’m here.” He shifted his weight to one leg, winced, and then shifted back to the other. “Got into a fight with Delaney last night. He tried to choke me, I smashed an ashtray over his head... I think we’re even for a while.” Dom’s wings twitched, feathers rustling, as if simply remembering last night’s events gave him an instant rush of adrenaline.

“Shit,” Darien chuckled. “I would’ve liked to see that.”

“I could’ve used the backup.”

“Where was Conrad?”

“Ah, you know how he is. He was getting his cock sucked by some chick in the bathroom and didn’t hear anything until Delaney came after me with a meat cleaver. People were screaming by then, emergency was called—it was a full meal-deal at no extra charge.”

Darien laughed, picturing it.

“The peace officers thought it would be a good idea to bring us here instead of to the precinct. More magic spells and all.” He winked.

“Right. You look hung over as shit.”

“Thanks,” Dom snickered, kicking a pebble away from his shoe. A question sparked in his eyes as he looked Darien over, no doubt searching for evidence to suggest he’d been locked up here as well.

“Why are you here, anyway?”

“Got called in by Finn Solace.”

The Angel’s mouth twitched. “Something tells me you’re pissed.”

More smoke rippled past Darien’s lips. “I’m livid.” He couldn’t deny that the cigarette was helping with his mood, but his blood was still boiling in his veins. It would take more than a little nicotine to fix how he was feeling right now.

Dominic was watching him with understanding. The Angel had known Darien for so long that he was one of the few people who understood the path he’d walked to become the person he was today, and how steep that path was. He’d seen the journey, not just the destination. The hardships that had pounded him into this flawed version of himself, the dreams that had been crushed and replaced with those of his sick father’s, the innocence that had literally been beat out of him—he’d seen all of it, and he’d still stayed. Those people were the best kind—the ones who didn’t run away when shit got tough.

“You want to talk about it over that drink?”

Darien had to smirk at that. “You’re already hungover and you want a drink?”

“Always.”

Darien looked up, where six magpies were soaring through the overcast sky. “I’ve got a collection to make. But if you want to talk about it over blood instead of booze, that can be arranged.”

Dominic flashed a grin. “Hell yeah.”

Unlocking the car with the remote, Darien flicked the cigarette to the damp cement and swung open his door. “Get in.” He paused, eyeing Dominic as he made his way around the car. “And watch your wings, will you? I’m not in the mood to vacuum up a bunch of feathers today.”

The Angel scowled. “Would you quit bringing that up?”

“It looked like someone plucked a chicken in here.”

“You’re an asshole. And you really need to stop telling everyone within earshot when you’re drunk too. How would *you* like it?”

Darien winked. “Still want to join me?”

“Yeah, I still want to join you,” he grumbled. He got in carefully, reclined his seat, and added, “Dickhead.”



Loren checked her phone for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past thirty minutes, the screen lighting up her face with a ghostly glow in the rain-drenched twilight.

Had thirty minutes passed already?

Where she was standing just outside the wrought-iron gates to Angelthene Academy for Magic, Loren tapped her foot on the sidewalk, water splashing her sneakers and gray leggings. It was unusually cold tonight, even for late Januarius, her fleecy sweatshirt barely staving off the chill in the damp air. She was looking forward to her time at Hell's Gate, where she could bundle up in a blanket with a hot cup of tea, her favorite Devil cozied up beside her.

The same Devil who wasn't answering his phone.

Even though she knew not enough time had passed for the clock to have changed yet, she checked the time again, squinting against the bright glare of the phone screen.

Darien was late. Under any other circumstances, she wouldn't have minded, but ever since that peace officer had interrupted their fun during her lunch hour, she had felt uneasy. He hadn't texted or called since he'd left, not even once. Usually, she wouldn't have minded, but again: *circumstances*.

Had something bad happened to him? Had he been arrested, and if so, why? Was he hurt?

She wished Dallas and Sabine were out here, so she could vent her worries to listening ears. But they were currently holed up in the dormitory of the House of Salt until suppertime. Dallas wouldn't be coming to Hell's Gate until after school tomorrow; as a venefica, she had more classes to attend this semester than Loren. Sabine had more classes as well, and then she would be spending her weekend in the Silverwood District with Logan Sands, the werewolf she denied having feelings for but was constantly unable to stay away from.

So, it was just her. Just her, Singer, and the last of the rain that had painted the evening a sleepy shade of blue.

As Loren waited for Darien, she took in her surroundings, forcing herself to focus on anything other than her phone. More specifically, the clock on the screen.

Palm trees sagged with moisture, rain dribbling off fronds. Sidewalks were flooded, every patch of grass waterlogged. The storm drains in the parking lot gurgled as streams of water swirled beneath

the city, the swift currents carrying debris that would soon clog them up, an accumulation that would stink to high heaven the moment Angelthene's hot sun came out to bake the city. In the fragrant jacaranda trees dotting the area, magpies chattered, their bodies hidden behind fat clusters of the forever-blooming flowers of Angelthene.

Loren squinted against the dark and scanned the closest jacaranda tree. It was the largest of its kind in the area, its canopy of branches stretching toward a bench near a garden of rocks and succulents. Loren recalled the day she'd collapsed onto that bench several months ago, minutes before Darien had pulled up and brought her and Dallas to Puerta de la Muerta to find answers about Sabrina's disappearance. The stretch of sidewalk under the broad shelter of the tree was speckled with purple-blue petals, the velvety flesh of them smeared into the ground by the shoes of passers-by.

It took a while to count the magpies in the tree, the dense shadows nearly swallowing up several of the black-and-white bodies perched on the branches. Loren counted them a second time, just to be sure.

There were six of them. How did the rhyme go again?

*Five for heaven*

*Six for hell...*

Loren stared at the tree. The birds rustled their wings, their piercing cries echoing far into the coming night.

It was only a stupid rhyme—no reason to break a sweat over a few birds. Contrary to what most people in Terra believed, she knew better than to think they were wise, all-seeing animals capable of predicting the future. Whoever had invented that silly superstition was full of it. The future could always change. Nothing was set in stone, and no feathered critter had the right to tell her that hell was coming.

A shadow caught Loren's eye. A shadow with a tail that curled up over his back.

Singer was snuffling around the creosote and cacti near the gates, ears erect with curiosity. Like all Familiars, his eyes glowed like gemstones, the shade of them—white like diamonds—bright against his misty body.

Loren snapped her fingers. "Stay close, buddy," she whispered. He raised his head to look at her, cocked it to one side, then promptly returned to snuffling, though he didn't stray any farther.

As the minutes wore on, Loren found her feet drifting toward the gates. It might be a good idea to get back on campus—just in case. If she had known Darien was going to be later than usual, she never would've come out here, especially not by herself. By now, the demons that dwelled in the sewers would be stirring awake in their dens of bones, eager to hunt on this moonless night. They would be

looking to feed, and the biggest and oldest ones wouldn't settle for measly sewer rats.

"Singer," she said quietly. Sensing the tension in her voice, the Familiar trotted to her side and looked up at her in question. "Let's go back inside until Darien messages us."

Together, they walked back to the gates. It took a couple seconds before they swung open, the magic spells tasting her aura as they prepared to let her back onto school property.

The pop of gravel under tires made her pause. As she looked over her shoulder, she was careful to keep her body inside the barrier of protective spells, the gates still open. No threats could touch her here.

Beams of white swept across the road, the wet pavement reflecting the headlights like a mirror. Loren held up a hand to block the glare as a moon-gray sportscar glided to a stop beside the curb, the deep engine giving off a vicious groan that screamed wealth and speed. The windows were tinted, fully concealing whoever drove it, and when the glass on the passenger's side lowered, she recognized the husky voice before she could make out his face in the murky darkness of the car.

"What the hell are you doing outside the gates?" Travis Devlin demanded. Well, that explained why she didn't recognize the car; she usually saw him on motorcycles.

She stifled a smile. "Technically, I'm in them."

"Which means you were *out* of them a minute ago." Travis's watch glinted in the glow of a streetlight as he waved a hand, his lightly scarred skin tattooed with blue pigment in geometric designs. "Get in the car before I tell Darien to whoop your ass."

The spells fluttered as Loren passed through the barrier and stepped off the sidewalk. She opened the passenger's-side door, the warm air inside the car wrapping around her like a hug. Singer bounded into her shadow with a joyful yelp in Travis's direction, as if to say hello, and disappeared, not a wisp of dark mist left behind.

Having Singer as her Familiar was an adjustment she was still getting used to. The dog accompanied her everywhere now, so she no longer had to feel bad about leaving him alone at the apothecary. Sometimes, he was so silent in her shadow that she would forget he was there until she heard him panting or yawning. Because Singer couldn't talk, her connection to him wasn't quite the same as the one Darien shared with Bandit. But sometimes she caught Bandit and Singer conversing, their words silent to her ears. Loren kept meaning to ask Darien how the Spirit Bonds worked, but she always forgot.

Just as she was about to get in Travis's car, something made her pause. She looked over her shoulder at the academy as a damp breeze blew through the area, carrying tendrils of golden hair across her face.

She could've sworn she felt someone watching her, but when she

scanned the twilight grounds, no one was there.

"Are you getting in?" Travis called through the open door. "Or are you hoping I'll have to kill a few demons before supper?"

"Sorry," Loren mumbled. Ducking her head, she eased herself down onto the low seat, the protective spellwork on the car raising a shiver on her skin, and closed the door. The interior smelled of spearmint and the woody aroma of leather cleaner. Now that the door was shut, she felt the last of the tension in her muscles subside, especially as she took in Travis flicking through the playlist on the touchscreen in the dash, not a hint of fear on his face. "Where's Darien?" she asked, reaching over her shoulder to grab her seatbelt and buckle it. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine." Travis turned the music down a few notches and pulled out onto the road. The headlights drove away the shadows lurking between the jacaranda and palm trees, the darkness not nearly as frightening now that a Devil was with her. "Took him longer than he thought it would to gut a target, so he asked if I could pick you up." The engine snarled as they zipped down the hill and into the city, tires splashing through puddles.

As if Darien heard their conversation, Loren's phone buzzed in her hand. She unlocked it and read his message.

*Hi, sweetheart. Sorry for not texting sooner, I got caught up with something. Travis there yet?*

*Yes, he just got here,* she replied. *Is everything okay?*

A typing bubble popped up on the screen. Loren watched it, chewing on her pinky nail, ignoring the acrid taste of sparkly polish seeping across her tongue. The suspense of hearing what the law enforcement had wanted from him today was killing her, and she found her foot tapping out an anxious beat on the floormat.

Finally, his answer came through. *Everything's fine. I'll see you at home in a couple hours, okay?*

She didn't believe that everything was as fine as he was making it out to be, but she supposed she could wait until she saw him in person before she dug deeper.

*Okay.* She added a heart symbol to the end of the message before hitting SEND. She clicked off the screen and set the phone on her thigh.

Travis stole a glance at her as he maneuvered the last of the day's traffic. "That him?"

Loren nodded, pulling the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her numb fingers. "Yeah. He said he'll be home in a couple hours."

"See? Told you not to worry."

They drove in silence for a while. Angelthene's spotless northern districts were bright with streetlights, billboards, and rows of

skyscrapers dotted with hundreds of glowing windows. In the heart of the North End was the Control Tower, the reflective cristala of Angelthene's tallest building shining like silver. The sight of the blade-like finial that pierced the starry sky, projecting the forcefield over the city, threw Loren back in time—to the events of Kalendae and everything that had transpired on that tower. She forced herself not to think about it as they made their way to the Victoria Amazonica District, breezing through dimly lit tunnels, across overpasses, and down stretches of winding highways.

Travis's voice slightly startled her in the quiet of the car. "You don't say much when Darien's not around, do you?"

She pulled her attention from the billboard flitting by her window—the neon letters advertising what the city claimed were the best protection spells on the market. Some of the billboards lining the roads were so large, they swallowed up the buildings behind them. After spending a little time with Darkslayers, Loren had learned a thing or two about spells. If a person wanted the best, they had to pay a visit to the Umbra Forum, and they had to not only be able to afford the spells sold through the black market, but also have the strength and status to walk out afterward without getting mugged or murdered.

Loren twisted in her seat to face Travis. "I've always been pretty quiet," she said.

Travis merely nodded.

"I like your car. Is it new?"

"Brand new. Just got it last week."

Silence resumed. It seemed Travis wasn't much of a talker either. Or maybe it was just her. Maybe she was making it awkward.

Kicking off her shoes, she put her cold feet up on the edge of the seat and hugged her knees. "So, what's your story with Darien? I mean, I know you're his cousin. But what made you decide to be a Darkslayer?" As soon as the words were out, she felt a prickle of embarrassment. Did anyone ever really *decide* to be a Darkslayer? Her question made it sound like she was inquiring about his choice of courses in university.

As if he could read her thoughts, Travis said, "I wouldn't really say I *decided* to become one. It fell onto my shoulders like an inheritance, I guess. My father is a Darkslayer in Yveswich. For reasons we won't discuss, I didn't want anything to do with him, so as soon as I turned seventeen, I left the city with Roman's help—Roman's my older brother—and came to Angelthene. Started hanging out with Darien again. He formed the Seven Devils, and the rest is history."

Interesting. There was still so much she didn't know about them, Darien included. She wondered if Roman was a Darkslayer as well,

and if he was, she wondered which house he belonged to in Yveswich. Most of the capital cities sprinkled throughout Terra had their own tiers of Darkslayers, and Yveswich, being even bigger and more populated than Angelthene, was no different. Yveswich was the capital of the state of Ker. It was home to the infamous Shadowmasters, a circle considered by some to be as dangerous and capable as the Seven Devils.

“Randal was your uncle?” she asked.

“Yup.” Travis made a popping sound on the *p*. “This might be hard for you to believe, but my dad made Randal look like a saint.” He gave her a sidelong glance. “I know what you’re thinking. ‘What’s up with all you guys having lunatics for fathers?’” He huffed a laugh and turned to look at her again, one scarred eyebrow raised. “Am I right or am I right?”

“No judgement.” Loren shrugged. “So, if you didn’t want to be a Darkslayer, then what *did* you want to be?”

Travis looked away from her so quickly, it was as if she’d slapped his head to the side. She eyed him as he readjusted in his seat and leaned an arm on his door.

Was her question really so bad that it had managed to unsettle him like this? *Strange*, she thought. But if she’d learned anything lately, it was that everyone had something that struck a nerve in them, even the Devlin Devil. Even *the* Darien Cassel had a lot of hidden demons she never would’ve guessed existed, had she not been given the opportunity to get to know him as well as she knew him now.

“If you want the truth, I was pretty artsy in school,” Travis said at last, his voice so low it was practically a mumble. “I’ve always wanted to be a tattoo artist.” A brief pause. “I was also into drama.” He said the last part so quietly, Loren barely heard him.

“Drama?” Her brows flicked up. “I have to admit, I’m surprised. You don’t really strike me as the type.”

Travis laughed. “I know, right? All everyone ever hears about are drama and band geeks.” While Loren’s smile grew at the thought of Travis being labeled a drama geek, his faded a little. “I was always into it, geeks or no, but if I had to pick one, it’d probably be tattooing.” He gestured to the sleeve on his left arm, the black muscle shirt he wore allowing every bit of the artwork to be seen. “I did a few of my own tattoos actually. And a couple of Darien’s.”

“Impressive.” Maybe she was imagining it in the darkness of the car, but she thought his cheeks were reddening.

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean it,” she insisted. “I’ve taken a good look at Darien’s tattoos. There was a lot of detail that went into those.” Every tattoo on his body was incredible. A work of art, each one, just like the man

who wore them. Sometimes, when she couldn't sleep at night, she would study them in the candlelight in their bedroom until exhaustion finally overcame her, his ink a lullaby for her eyes.

"If you're talking about his backpiece, that was Kyle at Diablo. I'm not that talented."

"I'm sure you're just being modest."

Travis merely shrugged.

She studied him as he switched lanes on the highway, passing several cars whose drivers were going way under the speed limit. He seemed to be avoiding looking at her.

"I say, do it," Loren said. Travis's head turned, ever so slightly, in her direction, but he kept his eyes on the road, the pavement washed in the white of the car's headlights. "Try it one day, if only to say that you did."

He seemed to really consider her words. He was quiet for so long that she was beginning to think he wouldn't say anything more, but after a moment, he shook his head. "Nah."

"Why not?" She took care to keep her tone polite.

"I'm a Devil." The way he said it implied it should be enough of an answer for her. "When we're sworn into a circle, in a way we are reborn. And when you're born a Darkslayer, you die a Darkslayer. Everyone knows that."

Loren lowered her feet to the floor, balancing them on her shoes, and folded her hands in her lap. "That sounds a little...dark."

"There's nothing light about this life, Loren," he said, his face lined with the kind of regret she couldn't even begin to fathom. "Don't ever forget that." The words were slightly bitter, the tone causing a tremor to dart up her spine.

"Well, I think you should still consider it. Okay?"

"Sure." When he smiled, it was a cold thing. He flicked up the volume of the music, his empty gaze on the road. "I'll consider it."

Loren couldn't stop replaying those words in her head for the rest of the ride. Even long after Travis had clearly forgotten all about their conversation, busying himself with mouthing the lyrics to the heavy metal song punching through the speakers, she still thought about it.

When you were born a Darkslayer, you died a Darkslayer. Did that mean Darien would always be one, too?

Maximus Reacher hated the smell of blood. He found his aversion to it kind of funny, considering he killed people for a living. And considering he was currently standing in the middle of a spacious industrial freezer in the basement of a nightclub in Oldtown, the corpses of two vampires bleeding dry at his feet.

As he lowered himself to a crouch in the puddle of blue-tinted blood, and began severing the target's head from the body, he felt like laughing.

Had he finally lost his mind?

Where she was squatting before the other victim, Lace Rivera looked up at him in question. She unsheathed the knife strapped to her thigh, her curtain of white-blond hair nearly draping in puddles of blood. Countless weapons were concealed in her black bodysuit, so many that she probably couldn't run out of options to kill people even if she tried.

"What are you smiling about?" Lace's breath fogged before her. She grabbed the vampire's head by the hair and began cutting into the flesh of his throat. Blue blood swirled into the drain in the centre of the floor, gurgling as it trickled down.

"I was just thinking that I might've finally lost my last marble."

Her ruby-painted lips parted with a smirk. "Honey, you lost that last marble a long time ago."

"Thanks."

She winked. "Don't mention it."

Max felt his cell phone buzz in the pocket of his brown leather jacket. He ignored it and kept cutting, flesh squishing beneath his blade. Blood bubbled up between his fingers and dripped to the cold floor. Mixed with the floral stench of vampire flesh, the metallic tang of it was nearly unbearable, especially in a confined space like this. With the freezer door shut tight, the distant thumping of music from the club one floor above could barely be heard in here.

They didn't usually collect in freezers—in fact, this was a first—but it was their best option at Club Ethereal, the only place in the building where they were least likely to be caught. The kitchen was rarely used, and their only chef was usually smoking out back for most of his shift. No one ever ordered food here, not unless they wanted to puke up their guts so hard they'd wind up in emergency.

When his pocket buzzed again, he stopped and wiped the sweat off



his brow with the clean skin of his wrist. He grabbed his phone out of his jacket with the hand that had less blood on it than the other.

The screen was full with messages from Darien. He unlocked it with face recognition and read the messages.

*Team meeting*, Darien had written.

The second one said, *Is Lacey with you?*

Approximately ten minutes later, another message had come through. *Where are you?*

And then, two minutes ago: *Answer me, fucker.*

Max took a clean end of his glove into his teeth and tugged it off. He placed it on his knee and started typing with one hand.

*You know*, he wrote, *it helps if you actually plan these team meetings instead of springing them on us like this.*

Barely two seconds passed before Darien's reply came through with another loud buzz. *Be at Hell's Gate in one hour.*

Max sighed. *My hands are a little full.*

*Then bag whatever you're carrying and get home.* Damn, he was bossy when he wanted to be.

Max looked down at the partially severed vampire head. What a goddamn mess they'd made. He almost felt bad for whoever would have to clean it up. Whenever they collected, they usually disposed of all evidence themselves to avoid problems or delays, but tonight was an exception. Law enforcement had been chasing after these vampires for some time now. The two had carved quite a path of destruction through the city by feeding on unwilling humans and veneficae until the victims were nothing but husks. Needless to say, these two were criminals who wouldn't be missed, least of all by cops and the MPU.

*Alright*, Max wrote back. He hated texting; his fingers were too big and clumsy for this tiny screen. Though he had to admit he'd improved since he'd started dating Dallas. The witch sent so many messages in a single day, he had trouble keeping up. *See you soon*, boss.

Lace was already on her feet, the duffel bag containing the first severed head sagging on the floor. She sparked a cigarette, her softly angled gray eyes roaming his face. "There's blood on your cheek."

"There's blood on your cigarette."

Lace examined the cigarette pinched between her manicured fingers, blood soaking through the cylinder.

She merely shrugged and took a long drag.

"Gross." Max put his glove back on and finished cutting the vampire's head off. He would've been finished with this a whole lot faster if they'd had the option of smuggling bigger knives into this shithole. But the bouncers at the door had insisted on patting everyone down, and there were limits to what could be hidden with

spells—even when someone like Tanner Atlas was the mind behind the magic.

When he was done, Max shoved the head into the duffel bag beside the other one—the evidence he would deliver to the rabbit messenger who'd come to them seeking business for a client. A client Max would be willing to bet was an officer of the law, likely someone who was at their wit's end trying to find peace for the family members of the victims.

"Who texted you?" Lace asked.

"Darien." Now that business was done, he peeled off his gloves and stood, the floor beneath his boots tacky with blood. "He said we're having a team meeting at the house in an hour."

"What for?"

"He didn't say."

"Shit." She blew out a long stream of smoke that made his eyes instantly water. Cigars, he loved. Cigarettes? Hated with a capital H. "I bet you it has something to do with Randal."

"Can we not be pessimistic right from the get-go?" He plucked the cigarette out of her fingers, threw it to the floor, and stamped it flat under his boot, blood splashing his pants.

"I wasn't done," she objected.

"I am." He gestured with a large hand to the freezer door. "Ladies first. I need a shower."

Upstairs, Club Ethereal was packed and noisy as hell. Sweaty bodies were crammed together like sardines, drinking and shouting and dancing, lost in an alcohol-soaked haze. Naked women and men gyrated on metal poles and hoops that hung from a low ceiling. The place was dusty and airless, and it reeked of vomit and booze and... and kerosene. He hadn't been able to pinpoint the smell right away, but now...

On the small stage, not far from where he was walking, were fire performers. Men and women dancing with fiery hoops and batons they waved through the smoky air. Cheers rippled through the building, spurring the performers to give them more. Max walked faster, bumping into bodies as he moved, his stomach and head spinning at the same pace. Behind him, Lace was trying to say something, but his ears weren't working. He had to get out of here.

Why did there need to be fire performers here? *Now?* While *he* was here? A perfect example of wrong place, wrong time.

The crowd screamed with excitement as one of the dancers breathed a stream of fire into the air above the stage.

Max flinched. He rocked back into the crowd, breathing hard. He slammed into a witch, who spilled her drink down the front of her dress.

“Hey!” the woman protested.

Max mumbled an apology and kept walking, away from the flames, steering his clumsy body toward the door. Sweat was beading on his skin, and suddenly he couldn’t remember how to breathe, how to move his feet at a pace faster than a shuffle. The sound of a girl screaming filled his head, and he tasted smoke at the back of his throat, could feel ash coating his skin, the powdery residue jammed up under his nails.

He had to get out of here. Where in Ignis was the damn exit? His eyes wheeled, looking but not seeing amid the panic—

*There.* The exit sign glowed like a beacon, close but still too far.

He walked faster, sweat running in steady tracks down his cheeks, making his hair cling to his forehead.

They were nearing the doors when he heard a commotion behind him. Swallowing bile, he forced himself to stop and turn around...

A man was blocking Lace’s path, his broad back facing Max. He was speaking to her in a voice that was too low for Max to hear from this distance. But as he listened, he was able to pick up on a few words between thumps of music, between the waves of panic gripping his mind and heart in a fist.

He recognized that husky voice immediately, and even if he hadn’t, the tattoo of a Hellhound marking the golden-brown skin below the man’s ear would’ve clued him into who he was. A full-blooded hellseher, he was eternally stuck in his late thirties. He had a full head of gray-flecked black hair and a groomed beard, the natural hue of his eyes so dark it was almost as black as when he used the Sight.

Max’s fingers curled tightly around the strap of the duffel bag as he waited. As he prepared to act, should Lace need the help. He wasn’t sure how useful he would be in his current state, but he had to try. He was Maximus Reacher, for shit’s sake. Years and countless therapy sessions had passed since that night. *Years.* He had to get a grip.

“Get out of my way.” Lace spoke through clenched teeth. She tried to move past the Hellhound, only to be fenced in again by his stocky form, partially obscuring her from Max’s view. “I said get out of my way!”

When Lionel Savage of the Hunting Grounds still wouldn’t budge, Lace’s eyes flicked to Max.

Max moved. His gut was roiling, and his heart was pounding like the music shaking the ground, but he moved.

He pushed through the crowd and stalked up to Lionel, who slowly turned around to face him, a smile playing on the curve of his scarred mouth. Two big hellsehers, Seth Marksman and Colton Adler, separated themselves from the crowd of people, making it known who they’d come here with tonight. Max would be willing to bet there

were more where these two came from. As former Right Hand of Randal Slade, Lionel fought dirty. He took zero risks, always bringing more backup than he allowed you to see.

“Reacher,” Lionel drawled. “I would say what a pleasant surprise it is to see you here, but I have to admit I half-expected you to still be serving as Lacey’s chaperone.”

“I don’t need a chaperone,” Lace hissed.

Lionel exaggerated the act of looking between Max and Lace. “I can see that.”

“Is there anything else you want to say, Lionel?” Max drawled, stepping closer. “Or can we quit fucking around and cut to the fun part?” He inched his hand out of his pocket, the brass knuckles attached to his fist gleaming in the strobe lights. “I’m itching for a fight, and your face would make a fabulous punching bag.” Truth be told, he still felt like hurling, but he hoped the lighting would disguise the truth. If it came down to a fight, he was less likely to win and more likely to vomit all over Lionel’s shirt.

Lionel gave him a cold smile. “A tempting offer, but I’ll have to take you up on it another time. Maybe we can all meet at the Pit.” He winked, that wolfish smile broadening.

“Yeah, maybe,” Max taunted back, knowing exactly what this asshole was alluding to. It was to Lace that Max mouthed, “Let’s go.” He could smell the kerosene again.

Thankfully, Lace didn’t hesitate to push past Lionel and make her way to Max’s side, her expression as cold and hard as a statue.

They turned and began to walk into the crowd. Max thought—and hoped—they were in the clear.

But then Lionel spoke. And Lace froze.

“If you ever feel like returning to a line of work that you’re actually good at, I could use some extra pocket change. You always were better at fucking strangers than you were killing them.”

Max stiffened. “Lacey,” he tried. He felt tension rippling off of her, more intense than his own. When he saw her upper lip curl back over her teeth, he knew they were done for.

She was whirling on a heel and lunging for Lionel before Max had a chance to react. “You asshole!” she barked. The music picked up tempo, nearly swallowing her words. The strobe lights matched it, plunging their surroundings into flashes of distracting color.

“Lacey—*don’t!*” Max bellowed. Shouldering the duffel bag, he dove across the distance separating him from Lace, catching her mere seconds before her fist could connect with Lionel’s nose.

The Huntsman was smirking, daring her to make impact, while his men stood by and watched, the same identical looks of sick pleasure on their faces. He wondered if these assholes had been around all

those years ago, when she'd lived under his roof.

Max picked Lacey up mid-jump, her body snapping back against his like a rubber band. She was flailing, the back of her head nearly colliding with his face. Guttural snarls and curse words tore out of her, the force she threw into her struggles nearly sending them both crashing to the floor. Max held onto her tightly, his body absorbing every kick, every twist and lunge.

"Stop!" He grunted as she threw her elbows into his ribs. "Lacey, *please*. This is what he wants, can't you see that?"

Just like that, Lace went limp as a ragdoll in Max's arms, the tension vacating her body as if it had never been there to begin with.

"This is what he wants!" Max hissed again. Maybe that was what had made her listen, what'd made her realize this battle was futile. Her chest was still heaving, and her heart was fluttering like a hummingbird's wings beneath his palm, but aside from that, she was still.

Lionel and his men snickered. Clubbers stared, a few reaching for their phones, as if to call the emergency line or snap a picture. The fire performers were gone, thank gods, but the place still reeked of kerosene and smoke.

"We need to go." Max's words were voiced in a quiet volume only Lace could hear.

"Put me down," she panted.

He set her on her feet, grabbed her by the wrist, and pulled her through the crowd of people, some of those people nearly tripping over their own feet in their efforts to get out of the way.

Lionel called from behind them, "Tell Darien I'll be seeing him soon." Max felt Lace's body go stiff at the threat, the pulse in her wrist skipping twice.

"Don't worry about that," Max said, lightly squeezing her wrist in comfort and warning. "Darien can handle him."

Max nearly knocked several people to the floor as he scrambled to get Lacey out of the club. And when they got outside, she rushed around the corner of the building and down a grimy alley, where she started pacing back and forth near the dumpsters.

The air was heavy from the day's rain, the humidity turning the medley of smells in the district into a pungent and fishy soup. Grateful to be free of the oily stink of kerosene, Max sucked down the repulsive air like it was fresh coffee or flowers as he followed Lace into the damp alley.

She was breathing heavily through her teeth, her pale throat bobbing as she swallowed back what Max knew was the urge to vomit. That made two of them, but for far different reasons. She ran a shaking hand through her hair, followed by the other, again and

again.

"I hate him," she choked out.

When Max spoke, he was careful to keep his tone soft. "I know—"

"You don't know *anything*!" she shrieked, the words slapping against the alley walls. She kept pacing in deep puddles, her fingers in tight fists. "*No one* knows what it's like to live under his roof. To be in his *care*." With a shake of her head, she repeated, "In his *care*."

Lionel was Lace's uncle, and one of her only living family members. After her parents died when she was a teenager, the social workers had carelessly dumped her on his doorstep like a sack of trash. From there, he'd put her to work in ways that had done a thorough job of scarring her soul as much as they had her body, forcing her to collect under the Darkslaying table before she even reached legal drinking age.

Killing targets for him had wrecked her so thoroughly that she'd briefly turned to another form of income, one she'd given up pursuing after her first week, realizing that it, too, wasn't the right path for her. Lionel had denied her a way out of Darkslaying until she'd turned eighteen, and even then, she'd found it difficult to fully escape him and rinse her mind clean of the poisonous thoughts he'd forced her to believe, how worthless he'd made her feel. Always criticizing her, always taking every last copper she made, and barely giving her food on her plate in return for the endless emotional scars.

When she'd turned eighteen, she'd left, and along the way she'd met Darien, who was forming the Devils at the time. Not knowing where she belonged in life, she'd accepted a position in his house, clinging to the exceptional patience he'd had for her, such a change from what she was used to. Darien understood what she'd gone through, and because of this, he'd never pushed her to collect more than she was comfortable with. Like so many others, she'd felt trapped in the Darkslayer life, unable to walk away from it. And even now, even years later, it was the only job she knew how to do, the only path she knew how to walk, no matter how much it tore her apart.

Max waited in silence. He simply watched her, trusting that her blind rage would soon set her free from its chokehold. That was what she needed whenever something like this happened. Patience. Silence. The space to let her emotions loose after repressing them for so long while growing up. Eventually, her breathing slowed, and so did her pacing.

She froze in the middle of the alley. "I want to cut his heart out, Max." Although the words were quiet, they weren't weak. "I want to cut it out and shove it down his throat. I'll never forgive him for everything he did to me." A tear slipped down her cheek, clearing a track in her makeup. She scrubbed it away with black-gloved fingers.

“Every time I see him, it throws me back to when I was sixteen, and I feel helpless all over again, like I haven’t just spent the past five years running with Devils.” With every word spoken, her voice grew thicker with emotion, and although her breathing had slowed, it was still ragged. “And I feel...alone. I think that’s the worst part: feeling alone. Nothing in the world is worse than that.”

Max took a step toward her, but forced himself to stop, giving her space. “You’re not alone, Lacey. Not anymore.”

A gust of wind swept down the alley, garbage scraping across uneven pavement. “He shouldn’t even be allowed to breathe.”

“One day, he’ll be rotting in the ground like the piece of shit he is. I promise you that.” Even if he had to be the one to cut out Lionel’s heart and feed it to him, he would do it, if only so she could finally have peace.

When she spoke again, Lace still wouldn’t look at him. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Maximus.”

She walked out of the alley, her vacant eyes on her boots. Max followed to where his SUV was parked in a dirt lot across the street from the club. Tanner Atlas was leaning back against the hood, legs crossed at the ankles, glasses sliding down his nose. The tinny music drifting through the speakers on his phone told Max he was playing one of those old videogames that used to only be available in arcades.

“Playing that frog game again?” Max asked.

The hacker glanced up. “I might be a touch addicted.” Pushing his glasses back up his nose, he closed the game and slipped his phone into his back pocket. “Took you guys long enough.”

Shouldering the duffel bag, Max shoved his hair back—the hair he now wore longer on the top and shorter on the sides, after Dallas had told him how much she liked not only the length, but the lightened pieces from the sun. “If you want to switch jobs next time,” he said, “I’d be happy to let you get your hands bloody for a change.”

“Pfft.” Tanner pushed off the hood and made for the back door as Lace headed for the passenger’s side. “You couldn’t hack a spell system to save your life.”

“Would you open the bloody door already, Atlas?” Lace’s words were scathing.

Tanner unlocked the doors with the remote, and then tossed the keys to Max. “Something happen in there?”

“Lionel happened,” Lace mumbled. She swung open the door and got in. “Lionel *always* happens.”

Max forced his jumbled thoughts into order as he got in the driver’s side and started the engine.

They drove in silence for several minutes along the dark curve of the Angelthene River. For once in his life, Max didn’t mind the fishy

scent permeating this district. He gulped it down, hoping it might disguise the kerosene and smoke lingering in his airways.

Speaking of smoke... Max grabbed the cigar from the cupholder, placed the end between his lips, and lit it, hurrying to snap the lighter shut. Even a small flame like that could sometimes unsettle him.

That first lungful was exactly what he needed to relax his muscles and his mind, to stop hearing those horrible screams echoing in his memories. He nearly groaned with pleasure, eyelids sliding shut.

"Please," Lace muttered. "I hear enough moaning from you every time Dallas sleeps over." Whoops—guess he *had* groaned out loud. Where was his mind at?

Tanner, who was slumped against his door, head resting against the glass, warned in a tired voice, "Pothole."

Too late. One of the front tires dipped into it, causing the vehicle to bounce. Tanner cursed as his temple thwacked against the window, jarring his glasses.

"Everyone awake now?" Max joked. His cigar slipped out of his mouth and onto his lap. He fumbled for it while trying to keep the SUV on the road, and he cursed as the stupid thing began burning a hole in his pants. "Oh, for shit's sake—"

"Can you keep your eyes on the road, please?" Lace drawled around a stifled yawn.

Max fumbled for the cigar that kept slipping out of his grasp. The inside of his thigh turned hot, and he hissed in pain. "Can you let me get this damn thing before it burns a hole in my precious dick?"

Lace bolted upright in her seat. "Max, *look out!*"

He looked up just in time to see a woman standing in the middle of the road.

Grabbing the steering wheel with one hand and the cigar with the other, he swerved to the left and slammed his boot down on the brake.

Tires screeched as the vehicle came to a halt in the middle of both lanes, steering wheel juddering in hand. Luckily, there were no other cars around but his, no pedestrians except the one.

And luckily, he'd managed not to hit the fool who'd decided to stand in the middle of the damn road at night.

The woman—a hellseher, no older than twenty, maybe twenty-one—squinted in the glow of the headlights. Slowly, she began shuffling toward the vehicle.

But she stopped walking nearly as soon as she'd started, her upper body half-turning in the other direction, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Her white t-shirt and jeans were soaked and speckled with mud. Her chin-length hair might've been blonde, but it was too filthy to tell for certain, never mind how this road was heavily shadowed



from a lack of streetlights, making it difficult to see anything. The ivory skin of her arms was flecked with shallow scratches, purple bruises, and more mud.

The leather of the back seat groaned as Tanner shifted forward to get a better look. "Think it's a trap?"

Slowly, Max turned around in his seat.

Tanner was staring through the windshield, head jutting forward like a chicken's. When he noticed Max's attention on him, he began to pull it back. "What?" Tanner demanded.

"Who the hell would be dumb enough to set a trap for three armed Devils in the middle of the night?"

Tanner frowned. "Lionel?"

Lace didn't look at either of them when she spoke. "Lionel's smarter than that. If this is a trap, it's a stupid one made by a stupid person on the wettest night of the stupid year." That about summed up how everyone was feeling after Kalendae. They were all still rattled, still trying to come to grips with the crazy shit that'd happened and move on.

Max put the vehicle in park and opened his door. He placed a booted foot on the running board and rested a hand on the roof.

"Hey!" he called into the damp night. The woman flinched at the sound of his voice. "Are you hurt?"

She gaped at him in confusion, her eyes—bolted wide with fear, the irises a preternatural, crystal-blue—flicking about the area. There was a vacancy to them, as if she were seeing things no one else could. It made Max's skin crawl.

Maybe she was on something. It wouldn't surprise him; Angelthene's drug problem was at a record high, and it was only getting worse every day.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" Max tried again. Her teeth were chattering, and she mumbled something he couldn't hear. Max cupped a hand to his ear. "I'm sorry, I can't hear you. The river, the rain." He gestured about the area with a sweep of his hand, to which the woman flinched again.

When she spoke, she used a language he wasn't familiar with.

Lace whispered, "What did she say?"

"She's speaking Ilevyn," Tanner replied.

There was a beat of silence as everyone's thoughts presumably went to the same place.

Lace said, "Isn't that a dead language?" It certainly was.

Max made to step down from the vehicle, but just as he was lowering his boot, the woman turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" he shouted. He jumped off the running board and took off

after her. Behind him, he heard Lace and Tanner opening their doors.

Max ran down the road, grunting as his boots caught on sharp rocks and slipped in slick mud. Cold air whipped past, filling his open jacket like wind in a sail. He kept calling after the woman, but she did not turn around, nor did she slow.

How was she so fast? Was he really so exhausted and mentally troubled that he couldn't keep up with a woman who was practically half his size, and with far shorter legs than his?

Another minute passed before he cursed and slowed to a stop.

To hell with this. If she wasn't interested in getting help, he would let her run.

Still, he found that he kept watching her, remembering how he'd felt in his days as an older brother worrying about his little sister.

There had to be a good reason she was out here alone in the dead of night in a city like Angelthene. That look of bone-deep fear in her eyes had been *put* there by someone. Someone who'd given her a reason to run, to be reluctant to trust anyone who offered to help her. It was for this reason that Max's boots stayed rooted in place.

The woman continued for several yards before she stopped, finally realizing she was no longer being pursued. She turned around, hugged her chest, and looked about the area. Her lips were trembling, either from the chill or because she was talking to herself, the words far too quiet for even a hellseher to pick up on from this distance.

Lace and Tanner caught up to him, feet splashing through puddles as they slowed at his side. The headlights of passing cars on a road not far from where they stood lit up the area with pulses of white.

"Umm, Max?" Lace said, catching her breath beside him. "You mind if I try? No offense, but she might be more likely to listen to someone like me and not a..."

"Not a what?" Max prompted.

Lace threw her hands in the air. "A big macho tough-guy chasing her down a dark street while shouting in a language she doesn't speak."

He blinked. "Oh." He felt like an idiot for not thinking of that. No wonder she'd ran from him. "Yeah, sure. You try."

Lace assessed the woman at a distance, deciding what to do, how to go about calming the stranger. "Here goes nothing."

She approached the woman with caution, speaking softly as she moved, testing to see if there were any words in their language that the stranger might be familiar with.

Max waited, Tanner observing at his side. Neither of them made a sound. Not even when Lace managed to get close enough that barely two feet stood between her and the stranger. The woman appeared to be more trusting of Lace than she was of Max, though her eyes

continued to flick to the blade strapped to Lace's thigh—one of the only visible weapons on that bodysuit.

It must've been nearly ten minutes before Lace began making her way back, the woman trailing behind her. Those crystal-blue eyes flicked from Max to Tanner and back again. Now that she was closer, Max couldn't help but notice the color of her nailbeds—a blue tone, dark as a sapphire near the cuticle.

Was he dreaming? Maybe this wasn't real, and he was currently passed out on the floor of Club Ethereal, lost in this strange dream.

"I don't know what to do," Lace said. "Maybe we should take her to a hospital."

The woman backed up, shouting hysterically in Ilevyn. Her eyes were bolted wide with fear, and she was gripping her upper arms so hard that her nails were nearly puncturing her skin.

"Okay, okay," Lace consoled her, hands in the air. "No hospitals."

"No...hospital," the stranger repeated. She quieted after a moment, though she continued to shake her head, lips quavering.

Max's eyes narrowed. Even her lips were tinged blue. He might've thought it the work of a glamour or makeup but...no. He didn't believe it was either.

Slowly, Lace lowered her hands.

Max shared a look with Tanner. "Let's get her in the back," Max said.

They made their way to the SUV. Lace got in the back with the girl, who scanned the interior of the vehicle like a child seeing something new for the first time.

"Maybe we should call Darien," Lace suggested as Max got in the driver's seat.

His eyes flicked to the rear-view mirror; the girl was cowering against her door, scuffed knees tucked up to her chest. She was shivering so hard, her teeth were clacking together. At least those were white. He felt like an idiot for even checking.

Max glanced at his watch—and cursed. "We're already late." He scrubbed a hand over his face, callouses scraping his cheeks. "We'll take her to Hell's Gate for now. Blindfold her if we need to." He turned in his seat to look at Lace in search of agreement.

After thinking about it, she gave a faint nod. "Alright. I'll blindfold her once we're nearing the district."

"Darien's going to flip," Tanner grumbled. He buckled his seatbelt, the snap loud in the quiet of the SUV. "And I'm going to tell him it was all your guys' idea."

"Thanks, Atlas," Max said flatly.

The hacker, face grave, merely winked behind rain-speckled glasses.

Lace's phone rang just as Max pushed the gearshift into drive. She checked the caller identification. "Crap," she mumbled, the screen lighting up her face in the darkness of the SUV. "It's Darien."

"Don't tell him about the girl." Max started driving, tires splashing through puddles that sprayed the vehicle with mud. "Just let him know we're on our way. We'll deal with...whatever this is when we get there."

Lace took the call mere seconds before it could go to voicemail. Her conversation with Darien was short, consisting of not much more than what Max had instructed her to say. Not a word was uttered about the girl with the blue nailbeds. The blue lips. The blue eyes. The not-blue teeth, thank the gods.

This was...it was messed up, that's what it was.

Lace ended the call with a sigh. "I think we—"

Her sentence was cut short as the stranger lunged for Lace in a blur, throwing herself across the back seat with a speed that managed to surprise them all. Suddenly, the knife strapped to Lace's thigh was in the girl's shaking hand.

Lace shouted, instantly moving to incapacitate the girl.

Tanner swore. He unbuckled his seatbelt, twisting around to jump into the back.

Max swerved to the side of the road, nearly rolling the vehicle into a ditch, the momentum sending them all careening to the right, bodies smacking against doors and catching on seatbelts. Tanner braced himself against the dash before he could fly through the windshield as Max stopped the vehicle and swiveled in his seat—

Only to see Lace gaping at the girl in confusion, her pistol frozen in her hands.

The stranger wasn't trying to attack. Instead, she was cutting into her own forearm with Lace's blade, a gurgled scream of pain and frustration clawing up her throat.

Blood bubbled through the knife wound.

Max blinked at the sight of it. It was...

Blue. It was blue.

"Fuck *me*," Max muttered.

A throaty scream tore out of her as she cut through skin and muscle, digging around in her arm with the blade, as if...as if searching for something. Breathing hard and quivering, her pallid skin covered in sweat, she threw the knife and the bloody microchip to the floor of the vehicle and stomped the latter beneath the heel of her shoe.

Once it was obliterated to her liking, nothing left of it but silver dust scattered across the floormat, she slumped against the seat. She shut her eyes, her chest frantically rising and falling. Blood dripped

onto the seat, running through the cracks in the leather.

Where he was crouching on his seat, still poised to jump into the back if need be, Tanner studied the destroyed object on the floor. “Is that a—”

“Tracking device,” Max concluded. “It’s a tracking device.”

Which raised his next question: in a world with Darkslayers, who the hell needed a tracking device?

“When I told you to bag what you were carrying, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Darien said.

He was standing outside the doors to Hell’s Gate, trying to decide whether it was worth his time to kill the three idiots staring up at him from the front steps, not including the delicate girl sagging against Lace’s side, her blue eyes wider than an owl’s. Her clothes were filthy, her hair was drenched, and her lips were slightly blue and trembling, as if she were standing in the middle of a snowstorm.

“You look mad,” Tanner observed. It was to Max and Lace that the hacker hissed, “I told you he’d be mad.”

“Mad?” Darien’s brows flicked up. “Mad is a huge understatement. I would kill all three of you for being so stupid if it didn’t mean I would have to rename the Seven Devils. *The Four Devils* doesn’t exactly have the same ring to it, wouldn’t you agree?”

Lace shuffled her feet. “We blindfolded her on the way here,” she said in a hopeful tone.

Darien crossed his arms, fingers curling into fists against his hardened muscles. “Again: not what I had in mind.” His focus returned to the girl.

There was a crust of blood on her forearm. It was bluish in color, just like her eyelashes and lips.

When the girl saw that his attention was on her, she looked at the doormat, her mud-caked hair falling in her face.

“Why is she bleeding?” Darien demanded. “And why is she looking at me as if I’m speaking gibberish?”

“She had a tracking device in her arm,” Tanner said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his gray jeans. “She cut it out.” He added in a mumble, “And she doesn’t speak any common languages.”

Darien sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face, ignoring the dull pain of his rings digging into the bridge of his nose. “Get the hell inside before someone sees us.” He stepped aside and waved them through.

Lace was the first to enter the house, pulling the stranger—who barely resisted, but turned visibly stiff—along by the elbow. Tanner and Max followed them, the latter mumbling an apology to Darien as he passed. Darien simply clapped him on the shoulder; it was the most he could manage right now.

Once everyone was inside, Darien blinked his Sight into his vision.

He did a once-over of the yard...the dark, quiet street beyond the brick wall... Lastly, he checked the neighboring houses before stepping inside and shutting the door. They never bothered to lock it, since the spells offered more than enough protection. Besides that, everyone with a brain knew a measly deadbolt would do jack-shit against the supernatural in this city.

Regardless, he locked it this time, feeling more than a little stupid for doing it. But there were people in this house that he had to protect, and even if that deadbolt bought them two extra seconds, those two seconds might mean the difference between the people he loved living or dying.

The others had made their way into the kitchen, where Ivy, Jack, and Travis were waiting, along with Dominic, who'd stuck around after Darien had run into him at the MPU headquarters. They were all at the island, Ivy in her husband's lap, arm slung around his neck. In the adjoined sitting room, Bandit was pancaked on the couch, nose whistling as he slept—a restful state that was soon interrupted as he became aware of the people around him, eyelids opening in a flash.

When the Familiar Spirit caught sight of the girl at Lace's side, he lifted his head, a low growl rumbling from deep in his chest.

*Cool it, big guy,* Darien said down their bond as he walked past the couch. *She needed help.*

*Another stray?* Bandit's voice was a smoky hiss. *This isn't a Darkslayer house anymore, it's a rescue facility.*

*If you're referring to Mortifer, you're going to have to get over that eventually, and you know it.* From the moment Darien had brought Mortifer home, Bandit had made it his personal mission to turn the Hob's life into a living hell, which was why Mortifer chose to spend most of his time on top of the refrigerator. Initially, it had provided security—a safe place to hide from Bandit and the other Familiars. The ice chips were an added bonus, and it hadn't taken long for the Hob to discover how much he loved those. Now, he barely ever came down from that fridge. Darien was still waiting for Bandit to snap and knock the whole damn thing over.

Bandit whistled a sigh through his nose and flopped his head back down. *Freeloading demon-monkey...*

Darien raised a brow. *I heard that.*

Bandit simply closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping.

"We haven't been able to figure out anything about her," Lace was saying to Dominic in the kitchen. "Not even her name." The stranger was still glued to her hip, her eyes flicking about the kitchen as if she'd never seen half the things that were in it. Dominic was seated at the island, finishing off his third beer.

Pushing his hair back from his face, Darien crossed the kitchen and

leaned back against the counter near the fridge, where Mortifer was chewing on chips of ice, as usual.

The *crunch, crunch* of ice being crushed between tiny teeth had Darien glancing at Bandit again, just in time to see his left eyelid slowly open as he looked toward the fridge...

*Don't even think*—Darien began.

Bandit promptly shut his eye. *Wasn't even thinking about it.*

Darien rolled his eyes so hard, he saw gray.

"It seems she can only speak Ilevyn," Lace was saying. Ilevyn—a language that was even harder to learn than Ancient Reunerian. Hardly anyone living knew how to speak it, and the odd person who did only knew fragments of the language, not enough to have a firm grasp on it. Most of it had been lost to time and death long ago, and because it was considered obsolete, not many people bothered to learn it.

The Angel polished off the last of his beer and leaned across the counter to set the bottle in the sink. "I know a little bit of Ilevyn, actually." His tone was casual, like it wasn't the biggest deal in the world.

Everyone's attention went to Dominic. When the Angel became aware of the multiple pairs of eyes on him, his own shifted from side to side, a frown pulling on his mouth. "What?"

Darien smirked. "Only the fact that Ilevyn hasn't been widely known or taught in thousands of years, yet you casually mention that you know how to speak it?"

"Yeah, what else are you hiding?" Tanner crooned.

Dom leaned back in his seat and stretched his vast wings out, the motion causing the girl to flinch. Barely a second passed before she was staring intently at the black feathers, fingers twitching at her sides, as if she were debating touching them. And whenever she wasn't entranced by his wings, she was examining the tattoos on his hands and arms.

Darien nearly laughed. The girl already seemed to fancy the Angel.

"My dad had an interest in learning dead languages," Dom said. "It was one of his hobbies when I was a kid, so I never thought of it as weird." Dom's dad, like so many others, had died of the Tricking.

Lace asked him, "Do you think you can try to learn anything about her? Maybe see if you can communicate, or at least try to find out her name?" At this, Darien raised a brow. Lace had never been the type to go out of her way to help someone, so this was a first. He wondered if she saw a little of herself in the stranger—back in her days of living not just under Lionel Savage's roof but also his rules.

If only she'd been as welcoming when he'd brought Loren home.

"I can certainly try," Dom said.



Darien pushed away from the counter with the heels of his hands and walked into the middle of the kitchen. "If you want to take her into the library and see what you can learn while I have a talk with my Devils, that would be appreciated."

"Of course," Dom said. "But only if I can have another beer."

"I'll go with him."

At the sound of Loren's soft voice, Darien turned to see her drifting into the kitchen, cradling an empty mug in her hands. He'd barely had a chance to see her since he got home. He was so wound up from the day's events that her voice alone was enough to ease the tension in his shoulders and make him think straighter.

Her eyes flicked to his, and he knew she could see the questions brewing in his mind.

"Maybe I can help," she added, her full mouth quirking in a way that suggested she was asking him what the problem was. Or maybe it was her way of challenging any assumptions he might be making about her abilities—rather, her *inabilities* to help them with this.

God, he loved her.

Even though Darien didn't like the idea of Loren being around this stranger before he'd had a chance to feel her out for himself, she could make her own decisions. And besides, Dominic would be there with her the whole time. That alone should've put his mind at ease, but he was beginning to realize that Kalendae had done a pretty thorough job of fucking him up. He wondered if he would ever find a way back to his former self, or if that version of him was dead now.

"Darien," Loren chided softly. "Stop it."

He blinked, clearing away the memory of when he'd woken up among the destruction of their city and realized he'd been dead only a moment before. "Stop what?"

"Overthinking. I can see the gears turning in your head."

"Gears?" Jack cut in with a snort. "What gears? There's nothing upstairs but some dust and a tumbleweed."

Darien shot Jack an icy glare that made most people shrivel up like a raisin. "Remind me again why I tolerate you."

Max said with a chuckle, "Because he's hard to get rid of. He's sworn in as a Devil *and* your brother-in-law."

Jack was grinning. "Unless you can forge my signature on the divorce papers, you're stuck with me, big boy."

"I don't need a signature, I need a bullet and a body bag, so quit being a smartass."

"Darien." Ivy clicked her tongue.

"Ivyana," he countered.

"Idiots," Lace offered.

The girl at Lace's side looked at her with curiosity. "Idiots?" She

fumbled the word on her tongue.

“Yeah, idiots,” Lace said. “Stupid, moronic, dumb—”

“Dumb.” She nodded emphatically.

Dominic wheezed a laugh. “She knows that one.”

Loren spoke up before the jests could continue. “I’ll be fine, Darien. I promise.” She looked over her shoulder at the girl. Empathy showed in her eyes, and it made Darien wonder if she was remembering back to her first night here at Hell’s Gate—how frightened she’d been. “Besides, she looks scared half to death. Maybe it’ll help to have someone like myself there with her, instead of just...” Her attention fell upon the Angel of Death, who raised a dark brow at her in question. Loren finished, humor coating her sweet voice, “...Well, Dominic.”

The Angel chuckled. “I’m not sure what you mean by that, but I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Considering you’re a big scary Darkslayer, it is a compliment.” She walked over to set her mug in the sink. With her back to the rest of the room, she mouthed a question only Darien could see: *Okay?*

Darien nodded. “We won’t be long.”

Even though one of his best friends was at Loren’s side, and even though this was *his* house and the library was just on the other side of the entrance hall, Darien still found himself watching Loren until she’d vanished inside the room and shut the doors behind her.

Before those doors had fully shut, she turned to look at him, something they both always did.

Always. And the thing was, he never got tired of it.

—

“Alright,” Darien said, leaning back in his chair with a slap of his thighs. He was at the head of the dining room table, his Devils seated around him. “Let’s settle it with a vote.”

He’d spent the past thirty minutes filling them in on everything that had happened with Finn Solace that afternoon, laying out the pros and cons of working with the Magical Protections Unit to take down the illegal arms trade his father had been involved in. There were a lot of questions that came up, a lot of concerns—and a hell of a lot of silence from Ivy, who was sitting at the other end of the table, Jack at her left, Lace at her right.

He would settle this with a vote first, and then approach his sister about her concerns after.

He had a feeling he already knew what the outcome would be, but he was tired as hell and looking forward to washing his hands clean of this piss-poor day.

“All in favor of working with the MPU to take down the arms dealers,” Darien said, “raise your hand.”

Hands went up. Slowly. Five hands, followed by his own, which meant his sister was the only person voting no.

Bandit, who had moved from the couch to the armchair in the sitting room, his shadowy body sandwiched between Singer and Twitch—Jack’s Familiar—side-eyed Darien.

*You’re about to get the biggest earful,* the Familiar said, his words all for Darien. As a spirit with a special connection to only one person, Bandit had the ability to switch between making his voice hearable by just Darien or by everyone else in the room too. Bandit continued, *And you know what I’m going to do?*

*Bandit, can you not?* Darien replied. *This isn’t the time.*

The spirit ignored his request. *I’m going to laugh my ass off, that’s what I’m going to do.* If it were possible for canines to laugh, Darien swore Bandit would’ve already been laughing. Instead, he blew out a huffing sound through his chops, black belly heaving with amusement.

Darien rolled his eyes and looked at Tanner. “Atlas, you’ve been quiet, yet you’re still voting yes. Fill me in on your thoughts.”

Tanner lowered his hand to the table, his other moving to fiddle with the circuit board bracelet he always wore. “It all comes down to jailtime,” he said. The others lowered their hands as well. “I’d rather cooperate with the MPU than wait for them to come after us and potentially spend the rest of my life behind bars. I think we can all agree that we’ve each committed enough crimes that we wouldn’t win in court, especially not against the MPU.”

Darkslaying had always come with its risks, but there was a delicate balance of crime and order that had kept people like Darien and his Devils safe from the threat of spending much time, if any time at all, behind bars. For years now, Angelthene’s MPU had been more than a little accepting of Darkslayer activity in the city. Other areas in the world weren’t as lucky as this one, with peace officers and Darkslayers going head to head on a regular basis, their squabbles usually resulting in jailtime that didn’t always stick, but when it did, it was like glue. And sometimes, jailtime was the easier outcome. Other times, a lot of blood was shed, most of it innocent and avoidable if both groups had simply left well enough alone.

But with this new Head Detective in town... It sounded like things might change, and quickly. In ways that most of his family members weren’t willing to find out about, and he couldn’t really blame them.

There was always the option of leaving the city and moving somewhere new, but...they’d built their lives here. The Seven Devils title was a part of who they were, and it was rooted in Angelthene.

Darien nodded slowly. “Anyone got anything to add to that, or are

you all feeling the same way?"

"Same way," Lace said. "I didn't come this far to spend my life in a cell." Travis, Max, and Jack murmured their agreements. "And never mind being stuck behind bars forever, we wouldn't even last that long apart. The people in there, they would...they would..." Darien saw her throat visibly bob.

"Kill us," Max finished in a tight voice, staring at the table. It wasn't an unrealistic fear. Out here, they were kings. In there...in there, nothing could protect them, and their magic would be nullified by the spells coating the walls. Most people who were sentenced to serve time in those prisons never made it out again, even if they didn't get the death penalty. Death found a way of claiming them anyway.

"Ivy," Darien prompted, taking care to keep his tone soft. His sister's eyes flicked unwillingly to his. "Let's hear it."

"You already know I'm pissed off."

"I can see that, yes. But it would help if you would talk to me."

Ivy chewed her lip. Darien waited, giving her the time she needed to gather her thoughts and assemble her words.

Finally, she spoke. "The last thing I want is for you to assume Randal's role," Ivy began. "This is dangerous, Darien. *Randal* was dangerous, and none of us really know the extent of his dealings. Besides that, you know how the other circles are going to feel if you suddenly step out of nowhere and take his crown."

Travis, who was using a knife to clean under his nails, cut in. "He wouldn't really be *taking* anything that doesn't already belong to him. It's automatically assumed by all circles that Darien should rise in rank with Randal's death, and even if Darien wasn't his kid, it still would've happened that way." He was right, of course. Darien and his Devils were at the top of the Darkslaying pecking order, so unless Darien decided he didn't want the title, it was his by default.

"Not much will change, Ivy." It was Jack who spoke now. He reached over and took Ivy's hand into his. "I mean, once we get the weapons dealers out of the way, life will return to normal." He allowed for a pause, lips twitching. "Aside from the fact that we'll be collecting a shit-ton more money." He barked a laugh that Travis and Max were soon echoing.

Ivy yanked her fingers out of Jack's grip. "How very nice of you to take my side, hubs," she hissed. She planted her palm on his face and shoved him away.

Jack looked wounded. "What did I do?"

"Always the wrong thing, that's what." Max laughed.

"This is why I'm never getting married," Travis mumbled.

"Alright, that's enough," Darien interjected. "Let's stay on topic, shall we?" He eyed Ivy. "The vote needs unanimous approval from

every one of us. Are you voting against this?"

Ivy nodded. "I am *definitely* voting against this." He had no idea what she saw on his face, but her gaze softened. "I don't want to watch you spiral into the same chaos Randal lost himself in, Darien."

"You say that like I'm going to let it happen."

"Power is a sickness. Whether or not it corrupts you is not always in your control."

Darien allowed for a stretch of silence, waiting to see if anyone else would step in, or if Ivy had anything more to say. When it appeared they'd reached the end of this topic, he gave one sharp nod. "That answers that."

Travis slid the knife away and pushed out from the table, the legs of his chair groaning across the floor. "Might as well pack your bags, everyone. We're going to be getting real familiar with the walls of the twin shit-water prisons soon." He stood and walked away.

Max shook his head. "Jeez, Trav."

"What?" Trav turned around, throwing his arms out in question. "I only speak the truth." Even though Travis was acting like he was joking, Darien knew his cousin well enough to tell that he was being serious about this. And he was afraid that Travis was right, and soon they would all be staring at the inside walls of one of the hardest prisons in Terra.

Her hair was blue.

Loren knew better than to stare, but her hair was blue. And not the kind of blue you could get from a box of dye. No—she swore this girl’s hair grew out of her head that color.

Why did she think that? Well, for one it *looked* like it was growing blue from the root, not a hint of brown, red, black, or blonde to show that it had been colored in a salon or someone’s bathroom. And two, the girl’s name was also Blue—or so Dominic thought. They’d already been through their introductions a million times, as Dom, too, thought the name was strange, and wondered if there was a chance the girl was misunderstanding their questions. But by the fifth time he’d tried confirming it with her, the girl—Blue—had grown frustrated, so they’d settled on the argument. For now.

The girl with the blue hair was named Blue. Oh, and her nailbeds were also blue. So were her eyes... Her lips, too, though only slightly, as if she’d eaten a blue candy, the sugar staining her skin...

Where she sat cross-legged on the patterned rug in the library, Dominic and Blue sitting with her in a circle, Loren resisted the urge to pinch herself. She tried her best to focus on the questions the Angel was asking the stranger, but her mind was spinning in endless circles. By the sound of their conversation, Dominic was getting another answer that seemed just as absurd as Blue’s name.

A deep male voice floated through the room. “Anything?”

Loren turned to see Darien standing in the doorway. He was leaning against the side jamb, one hand in the pocket of his faded jeans. Loren tried not to drool over how good those jeans fit him. Same with his shirt—black and clinging to his body.

He must’ve sensed her staring, because his attention fell on her, his mouth tipping up on the left side.

For a long while, they looked at each other, the world and its troubles melting away. Even though she was wearing pajamas that weren’t the most flattering things in the world, Darien’s gaze drifted over her body, lingering the longest on her breasts, his heated stare causing her nipples to pebble under her shirt. Her teeth went to her bottom lip, and her heart sped up to a pace she knew all ears in this room would pick up on.

Indeed, Dominic was soon huffing a laugh. “Well, this just got all kinds of awkward. I feel like I walked in on something I shouldn’t be

seeing.” A pause. “Or feeling.”

“Maybe you should leave, then,” Darien said without taking his eyes off Loren. The butterflies in her stomach turned into a riot of beating wings that threatened to spill out her mouth. Heat spread through her, pooling in the areas that had begged all evening for him to touch her.

Loren looked away before she could throw herself across the room and do something that would surely scar Dominic and...and *Blue*.

That name would take some getting used to.

Come to think of it, she probably couldn't scar Dominic even if she tried. She would be willing to bet he'd seen enough in his lifetime that hardly anything could surprise him anymore.

Blue, on the other hand, was glancing between Loren and Darien. It became clear that she'd picked up on what was going on between the two of them when her face darkened with embarrassment, her cheeks flushing blue. She looked at the plush rug, her nearly dry hair falling in her face.

“You were saying, Dom?” Darien prompted.

Dominic scratched the back of his head. “Uh, to be honest, I'm a bit...rusty.”

Loren said, “But you were able to translate *some* of what she's been saying. Don't be shy, Dominic. Go on and tell him.” She waved her hand in Darien's direction.

“Yeah, Dominic, don't be shy,” Darien crooned.

Fighting a smile, Loren looked over her shoulder at Darien again, and he winked at her before giving his attention back to the Angel.

For once, Dominic didn't have one of those witty comebacks he and Darien usually passed back and forth. He gave a nervous laugh—another rare occurrence. If Loren had her new camera with her, she would've snapped a picture to immortalize the moment and add it to her new photo album.

Dominic explained, “She said she came to the city with some people who were looking for...a colored bird.” He snorted and ran a hand through his hair, catching his fingers in the strands. Shaking his hand free, he leaned back and stretched out his wings, hands braced on the rug behind him. “I'm starting to feel like an idiot.”

“Yeah, you sound like one too.”

Dominic scowled. “Thanks, Dare.”

“A colored bird,” Loren mused, tapping her chin with a finger. “Do you think it has anything to do with...?” She turned to Darien again.

She still had nightmares about the events of Kalendae and the imperator; about climbing into the back of his limousine outside of her school, coming face to face with the man who ruled all of Terra. Those cold gray eyes; that scarred mouth. He'd threatened her, made

her swear not to speak of the happenings of Kalendae; made her illustrate that her magic was, in fact, gone. He'd pieced together what had happened after discovering that his precious Well replica had been destroyed, nothing left of it but a pit in the tunnel floor.

Calanthe had gotten into the limousine shortly after they'd started talking. Loren had felt sick looking at her. The vampire did not remember their fight on the Control Tower, for time had been turned back to before then, manipulated and pulled apart like taffy to fulfill her wish. But Loren remembered.

When Darien met her stare, he was all business, every hint of play on his face gone. "Let's not worry about that until we get a proper translator."

"Hey," Dominic protested, wings flaring out with a snap. "I *am* a proper translator."

"You just said you're rusty, you goon."

"I am, but I swear I know how to speak Ilevyn. Her name is Blue, and she's on the run from people who are looking for a colored bird."

Darien raised a brow. "Blue?"

The girl perked up at the sound of her name. She seemed reluctant to look at the Devil in the doorway, but she did anyway.

Dominic gestured between the two of them. "Blue, Darien. Darien, Blue. There—introductions are done."

Darien pushed away from the doorjamb and drifted back into the entrance hall, his dragging footsteps suggesting he was exhausted. "I'll contact Arthur and see if he can help us out."

"I got this, Darien, you don't need to bother Arthur," Dominic called. "He's been through enough." Silence. "Dare?" He shook his head, muttering, "Darien, goddamn you."

Darien's voice floated from the kitchen. "Not listening."

Feigning a yawn, Loren unfurled to her feet, eager to be alone with Darien. "I'm off to bed. Fill the others in?"

Dominic winked. "You got it."

"It's been fun."

"Yeah, it's not every day you get to meet a girl named Blue." He lightly bumped Blue's shoulder with a fist, the playful gesture earning him a shy smile and a duck of her head.

"She's not as afraid of you as I thought she'd be," Loren said.

"I tend to have that effect on people once they get to know me. We might be Darkslayers, but we're still people."

Loren smiled. "I figured that out a while ago. Night, Dom."

—

Loren stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and adjusted her



hair for what was probably the hundredth time since she'd come into Darien's suite. He was still downstairs with the others, but she knew it wouldn't be long before he made his way up here. The thought set her nerves on fire, and the butterflies in her stomach began their familiar, dizzying dance that made her head feel like a spinning top.

Did he even like red? She adjusted the straps of her lacy lingerie, eyes raking down her body with critical assessment. Was the garter too much? And what about the fishnet stockings?

She shook her thoughts away and fixed her hair again to give it more lift at the crown of her head. She was being ridiculous, she knew. The last thing Darien would be worrying about when he walked in and found her kneeling on his bedroom floor was what color she was wearing.

A deep voice drifted down the hallway, and she froze at the sound of it. She held her breath and listened, staring at the black double-sink countertop, the icy chips of mirror embedded in the quartz sparkling in the bathroom light. She couldn't make out any words, but she would recognize that voice anywhere. She would know it in sleep, in death—and she would certainly know it when it was only several feet away now, so close that her surprise was about to be foiled.

A curse floated from her tongue as she flew across the spacious bathroom, past the huge stone shower with the glass doors and the soaker tub beside it, bare feet slapping on heated tiles. She nearly fell on her ass as the plush rug near the bathtub slid around under her feet, but she steadied herself against the wall and yanked the door open—

It jerked to a stop halfway and slammed into her shin.

She hissed, hopping on one foot. As soon as the pain went away, she lowered her foot to the floor and eyed the obstacle.

The rug had bunched up like an accordion under the door, and it threatened to trip her again as she pulled on the door handle.

It was jammed under there. She pushed the door shut and tried it again. Again and again and again, she pulled. The door rattled, and the stubborn rug bunched up repeatedly, not budging so much as an inch, not even when she bent over to yank on it. She couldn't get out, and...and she could hear the bedroom door swinging open, the buckles on Darien's boots jingling as he walked into the empty, lamplit space, the space where she was *supposed* to already be kneeling—

"Great," Loren huffed. So much for the surprise that was meant to distract him from all the crazy things that had happened today.

"Loren?" Darien called.

Loren closed her eyes in defeat and thudded her forehead against the door. "I'm stuck," she mumbled into the wood.

“You’re stuck?” Darien’s voice was right on the other side now, and there was a hint of humor in it. “What do you mean you’re stuck?”

“The stupid rug won’t let me out.”

There was a pause, and then Darien chuckled.

“Don’t laugh!” Loren’s eyes flew open. “I had a surprise for you, and now it’s ruined.” She pouted, thumping her head against the door again.

There was a pause. “A surprise? We’d better get you out then.”

It didn’t take long to get the rug unjammed, and when the door lurched open, Loren stumbled forward as the rug flattened out, one last wrinkle threatening to throw her clumsy butt on the ground. She caught herself against Darien’s chest just as his hands closed around her arms to steady her. Her heart skipped a beat at the contact, a current of golden warmth spreading between them.

A low whistle slipped through the slayer’s lips. “Look at you...” His voice was a sensual purr, and there was a smile in it that hinted at how pleased he was by her appearance. “Wow. You weren’t lying when you said you had a surprise for me.”

“Getting locked in the bathroom wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I thought my days of saving you from wrinkled carpets were over, but I guess I was wrong.” He paused. “Wait.” He grew abruptly serious as he studied her face, leaning closer...closer...so close, their noses were almost touching. His eyes narrowed, and a smile played on his lips. “Are those...freckles?”

Blood rushed to her face. She tried to duck her head, but he stopped her with a knuckle below her chin.

“Open,” he commanded.

She did as she was told, showing him the brand new diamond sparkling in her tongue. Unlike the enchanted piercing that had done a fabulous job of hiding the freckles on her nose, this one was ordinary, but no less expensive. A real diamond from the impressive selection at Jack and Jill’s, a kiosk near Ella and Prince on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star.

“Changed it,” she declared.

The smile on his face grew. “I was right.”

“About what?”

“You’re even more beautiful now that you’re not hiding those adorable freckles.”

“Enough about me,” Loren said, but she was fighting a smile. “This night is for *you*, handsome.” Taking his hands into hers, she led him to the center of the room near the huge bed.

“For me?” The words were playful but curious. “What’s this surprise I keep hearing about?”

“I thought you could use a stress reliever,” she said, letting go of

his hands, "after the kind of day you just had."

Slowly, she lowered herself to her knees before him, trying to appear braver than she felt. The lingerie and hair worked wonders, but in reality she felt as wobbly as a wet noodle. Folding her hands on her thighs, she peeked up at the sex god standing over her.

She'd wanted to kneel before this man for a long time now. Maybe even as far back as their lunch date at Rook and Redding's, when she'd realized how stunning he was, never mind the fact that he'd saved her life without knowing a thing about her.

"Is that right?" He was so close, she had to tip her head all the way back to look at his face. "What did you have in mind?" He reached down to brush a strand of hair off her cheek.

"Well, I was remembering that night at the Devil's Advocate..."

A sinful smile ghosted across his mouth. "What about that night at the Devil's Advocate?"

"We were sitting at the table..."

"And?" His thumb went to her bottom lip.

"And I asked you what you wanted to do to me." She tried to keep her tone steady, but there was a flutter in her stomach. And the way he was looking at her... Gods, she wanted him right now.

"And what did I tell you?"

"A few things." She gulped as he traced her mouth with the rough pad of his thumb, leaving little sparks on her skin. "One of which we haven't done yet."

"And what's that?" Of course he would make her say it, filthy Darien.

"You said you wanted to fuck my mouth."

That smile spread into an unholy grin. "I said that, did I?" His voice was as dark as his stare.

Loren wet her lips. "I love it when you look at me like that." When Darien's brow flickered with a question, Loren explained, "You look at me like I'm made of gold."

"You're worth far more than gold to me, Loren." He bopped her nose with a finger, and then he pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor beside him.

And suddenly, there was a lump in her throat. Her heart kicked into a sprint as she took in the new tattoos on his broad chest...the shadows dipping between his sculpted abdominal muscles...the grooves that ran alongside his hips, forming a V that disappeared beneath his jeans...

Darien's hearing must've picked up on her racing heart, because he asked her, "Have you ever done this before?"

A grimace flickered across her face before she could stop it. "Once," she admitted. "And I regretted it the moment I started."

"We don't have to talk about it."

"I was eighteen. I thought I liked him, but...I realized how wrong I was after that night. He ended up telling everyone in the whole school, like I was a trophy he'd won."

When she peeked up at him, she saw that his eyes were hard, his jaw clenched tight. "Want to give me a name and an address and I'll pay a visit to his door?"

"Tempting, but maybe another day." She reached for his belt buckle.

"Give me the time and place, and I'll be there." A pause that was loaded with emotion spread between them. "If you need me to stop at any point, you tell me. Promise?"

"Promise."

With a flutter in her chest that was echoed by her stomach, she undid his belt and pushed his jeans and boxers down, his cock already stiff. Standing at nearly six and a half feet, he was a wall of solid muscle, looming over her like a shadow of death. She had to admit she was a little intimidated and a lot turned on.

Taking his thick cock into one hand, she ran the other up his powerful thigh, feeling the hard muscle beneath tattooed skin. Rising up on her knees, she pressed her lips to the space below his navel, the gesture causing his hand to come around the back of her head, where it gripped a fistful of her hair.

As she stroked the length of his cock, she pressed another kiss to his body, even lower this time, gliding the tip of her tongue down one of those muscular grooves that ran alongside his hips. His cock twitched as her mouth descended, her tongue nearing it with every soft kiss.

"You're a little tease, aren't you?" His breathing was already labored, his voice low and rough as gravel. The sound of it made her wet, her underwear instantly soaking.

She pressed another kiss to his body, looking up at him as she did it.

"You drove me crazy for months, did you know that?" That sexy voice was somehow deeper than it had been a moment ago. Rougher. "I wanted to fuck your pretty mouth so badly, it kept me up at night."

"How soon?" she asked, wetting her lips. She was so drunk off him, she barely understood her own question. She stroked his cock, and it twitched again in her grip. She clarified, "How soon after you met me?"

"Rook and Redding's." *Oh god.* She pressed her thighs together, a pulse forming between them from the memory of that day—and the realization that she wasn't the only one who'd secretly fantasized about this so early in their relationship. Darien added, "Since the

moment you sat across from me and acted like a naughty girl, getting under my skin like that. I wanted to spank you for talking back to me.” His index finger went to her lower lip. “But more than that, I wanted in *here*.”

Loren’s voice came out breathy, her desire to please him quickening the pulse between her legs. “I want you to show me,” she dared, biting her lip as she looked up at him. “I want you to fuck my mouth the way you imagined fucking it.” As fast as he wanted. As rough as he wanted. Hard and deep, just like he’d promised her at the club. No holding back.

Darien’s eyes blazed like fire. He tapped her mouth with the finger that was still pressed against it. “Show me what that pretty tongue feels like, and then I’m going to fuck your mouth till you’re crying.”

Heart hammering in her chest, her need for him crackling in the air between them, she did as she was told, tasting him from his base to his tip, her piercing rubbing along his impressive length.

“Fuck, that feels good.” His hand tightened in her hair, and a groan rumbled through his chest.

Knowing full well what she was doing to him, she swirled her tongue around the tip of his cock, tasting a bead of his cum. The feeling made him grip her hair to the point of pain.

The look in his eyes darkened in a way that had nothing to do with the Sight, the intensity in that stare making her heart stumble and her toes curl against the floor. “If you keep teasing me like this,” Darien said, “I’m going to have to pin you down on the bed and fuck you till you can’t walk.”

She gave him a naughty smile—and then she began.

Slowly, she drew him into her mouth, inch by inch. After how badly she’d just teased him, he was incredibly patient as she adjusted to the feel of him, taking him in at her pace.

When the broad head of his cock nudged the back of her throat, he tensed. “Oh fuck.” The two words were breathless and husky, and she felt the muscles of his leg tremble under her palm.

He started moving her head back and forth, easing in deeper with every movement. She couldn’t take all of him in, so she wrapped her fingers around his base to make up for the rest.

“Eyes on me, baby,” Darien commanded. She looked up at him again as he started moving her head faster. “Keep your eyes on me.”

As soon as he felt that she had adjusted enough, he set his own rhythm, moving her to the speed he wanted. As the minutes sped by, his thrusting grew deeper and faster, until he was fucking her mouth so hard her eyes were watering.

Darien watched her the whole time, and she watched him, both of them wholly intoxicated with each other. His movements were quick

and firm as he thrust into her mouth. Her throat. His breathing was a ragged pant, and sweat trickled through the grooves between his abs. Seeing him this undone by her was the hottest thing. She didn't think she had ever been so turned on in her life.

He swore around a throaty groan. "Fuck, Loren." The tip of his cock slammed into the back her throat, again and again and again. He was gone, totally gone, consumed in the haze of his lust. Lost in her, just as she was lost in him, his eyes filled with dark desire. When a tear ran from the corner of her eye, he wiped it away, loving her even as he kept moving, lost in his cresting pleasure. "I want to come on your tongue."

Hearing the question in his words, she lightly squeezed his thigh in encouragement, giving him the okay to do it. She wanted it too, wanted all of him so badly that she could barely handle it.

His movements grew more urgent and uneven as he rode her mouth to his climax. He swore under his breath, abdominal muscles rippling as he found his release, burying himself in her throat.

The feeling of his cock throbbing in her mouth turned her whole body hot with desire. Loren watched him as he tipped back his head, his muscles tensing and flexing with his release, strands of dark hair hanging in his face. His eyelids slid shut, his face transforming into a mouth-watering work of art as his pleasure consumed him. She drank him down, savoring every bit of this moment, not stopping until his movements slowed. Until the fist in her hair loosened.

Until her man was utterly spent and satisfied. Only then did she give his cock one last suck before releasing him. She was out of breath and panting, but so was he.

Darien looked down at her, sweat glistening on his chest, hair fluttering with his heavy breathing. He used his thumb to wipe away a tear from the corner of her eye, and then another one that ran down the other cheek. "Wow," he said with a sleepy smile. "That was incredible." He cradled her face in his warm hands. "*You* are incredible."

She gave a breathy laugh.

"Up." He took her hands into his and helped her to her feet, her legs stiff from sitting for so long. "On the bed. Panties off." He stuffed his cock into his pants and rebuttoned them, leaving his belt undone.

Loren blinked at him in surprise.

"You didn't think I'd be done with you so soon, did you? I'm going to suck on your little clit until you're screaming my name." The statement dried out her mouth and had the pulse between her legs returning with a vengeance.

She slid her panties down to her ankles and stepped out of them, leaving the garter and stockings on. They had barely hit the floor

before Darien was stalking up to her, belt and boot buckles jingling. He palmed her throat, fingers gripping her gently, and pushed her toward the bed.

The backs of her thighs hit the side of it, and she fell back onto the mattress. He shifted his hands under her and cupped her ass, pulling her down to the edge of the mattress and opening her up to him.

Now kneeling on the floor between her thighs, he pulled her legs open wider, a fresh breeze from the cracked-open window by the bed raking across her skin. Even with the lingerie on, she felt wholly exposed and vulnerable, a thrill of excitement dripping down her spine. He began his work on her by kissing the inside of her left thigh, that familiar heat instantly blooming on her skin from the contact.

She squirmed, needing his mouth on her so badly it felt like she would die if she didn't get it. His eyes flicked up to meet hers, a stunning shade of gray-blue against dark lashes, as he kept kissing his way down her thigh, his tongue sweeping out to taste the area of her skin peeking out above the stockings. He nipped at the inside of her thigh, teasing her, one hand grabbing her ass while the other came up to palm her breast, the hard peak of her nipple showing through the red lace. When she wet her lips, a whimper slipping out of them, his mouth crept up into a devilish grin that she could feel against her skin.

When he finally got to the space between her thighs, his eyes locked on hers. He lightly blew on her pussy, raising a chill on her skin. His eyes turned black as he read her aura, laid bare for him to see without the Avertera talisman concealing it. She often took it off before times like these, because she knew he liked to read her.

Her need for him went through the roof. "Darien," she begged.

"Tell me what you want." Those eyes were still black.

"I want you to make me come." She must've said something right, because the look he gave her was unlike anything she'd ever seen. If he didn't start touching her right now, she might combust.

With another of those sinful smiles, he lowered his mouth, pressed a kiss to the spot just above her clit, and then—thank the gods—he began to fuck her with his tongue.

His strokes were precise as ever, moving in circles around her swollen clit and sliding up and down her wet center. When she began to squirm, he pinned her to the bed with one large hand on her stomach, the other gripping one of her thighs tightly, holding her open to him whenever her muscles began to contract. She whimpered a curse word and bit her lip.

Darien was watching her with such intensity that she felt flushed from her head to her toes. With blue eyes, he devoured every face she made, every sound that floated off her lips. He took his time, looking

like he was enjoying this as much as she was. Every time she neared climax, he lightened his pressure, dragging out her orgasm for as long as possible.

It was excruciating, but so good. Her clit was throbbing, every firm flick of his tongue making her legs twitch, and when she fisted the sheets, rocking into his mouth with a strangled gasp, *he* even groaned, a low rumble that had her dripping onto the sheets.

He tugged her clit into his mouth and sucked hard, his fingers digging into her thigh, while his other hand curled into a fist on her stomach. Warmth rushed to the space between her legs, spreading right up to her navel as her orgasm began to crest, her breathing shifting into breathy whimpers and moans.

She cried out his name as she reached climax, her back arching in the sheets. Rosy heat flooded her entire body as the orgasm worked through her, making her shudder with pleasure, the muscles of her thigh that was in Darien's grip tightening while her other leg curled around his shoulders, her heel digging into his back.

He didn't stop sucking until another orgasm had followed the first, the pleasure so intense that she didn't know whether to beg him to stop so she could remember how to breathe or keep going.

When he was done, and she was nothing but a limp and trembling mess before him, he sat up, tongue gliding across his top lip.

"That," she gasped, "was not part of my plan."

"I'm in charge, you little brat." He grabbed the foot that was resting on his shoulder and kissed the inside of her ankle. He set her foot on the bed and rose, and she closed her trembling legs as he bent to kiss her on the lips. She could taste herself on him, but she found that she didn't mind. "My brat," he said against her mouth, his voice a bass rumble.

"Dictator," she mumbled back.

His eyes widened with feigned anger, a threat for a spanking glinting within them. She wouldn't mind that either. The first time he'd spanked her in the bedroom, she had nearly come from the feeling alone. That particular memory sent a fresh rush of color to her face.

"Really?" Darien's voice was deadly.

She flashed him a bright smile. "Kidding."

"That's what I thought." He took her hand, tugging her up off the bed. "Get into something comfortable. You look like you could fall asleep at a clap."

He wasn't wrong, so she made her way into the walk-in closet, her legs as wobbly as a new fawn's. When she emerged a minute later, he was lying on his back in bed, wearing nothing but black boxers. An ankle was crossed on a propped-up knee as he watched the ceiling



with a look of concentration on his face, likely thinking about the things she had managed to make him forget for an hour.

“Do you think I can get my own Devils tattoo?” Loren crawled across the mattress to his side, sheets and blankets rustling.

“What?” Darien snorted, his serious expression clearing out like a storm pushed away by wind. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get you one of those sticky ones that last a couple days. How does that sound?”

She snickered. “Hilarious, Darien. I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

With a flip of her hair, she laid down on the bed and snuggled up against his side. “Whatever you say, Mister Bossy.”

Darien was eyeing the black t-shirt that fell nearly to her knees. “Is that my shirt?” Amusement shone in his eyes.

“*Our* shirt,” she corrected. She slung a leg over his and tucked her head into the crook of his shoulder. “So, what was the consensus?”

A strong arm wrapped around her, holding her tightly against his body. “The consensus is that we aren’t doing it.”

Loren stiffened. “And what if you end up...?”

“Behind bars?” He tried to look her in the face, but she was careful to keep it hidden. When she nodded, he told her, “Then we’ll deal with it when we get there.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. “How am I supposed to love you properly if you’re kept away from me?” Her heart gave a painful thud, fully skipping a beat before lurching back into its usual rhythm.

Darien’s hand traced a comforting pattern across her ribcage, the heat from his palm warming her skin through her shirt. *Their* shirt. Her mouth twitched with a smile, despite the horrible topic at hand that felt like someone was squeezing her heart like a lemon.

“Don’t worry, sweet pea.” The teasing tone in his voice suggested he was about to say something he knew he shouldn’t say. “You would move on. It wouldn’t take long, not with your pretty face.”

Loren lifted her head to glare at him. “Darien!” she scolded, flicking him in the nose. “I absolutely would *not* move on.” Darien gave one of those low, rich laughs that made the butterflies in her stomach stir. She lowered her head back to his shoulder. “Besides, this pretty face you speak of will age.”

It was Darien’s turn to tense, the muscles in his shoulder hardening under her cheek. “We’re not talking about that tonight.” His voice was firm but not mean.

“Or any night.” She had brought up the subject far too often, and she knew it. Her worry of the future was robbing her enjoyment of the present, but she couldn’t help it.

“Loren,” Darien rebuked.

She peeked up at him to see that he was pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand, his jaw tense. In the twenty years she’d been alive, she hadn’t thought much about her mortality—not until she had fallen in love. Not until she had found someone she didn’t want to lose.

Darien caught her staring. He lowered his hand from his face and brushed the hair off her forehead. “Nothing can keep me from you. You think I’m going to let some steel bars get between us when not even death was able to keep us apart three weeks ago?”

Loren flinched. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

He tightened his hold on her waist and pulled her snug against his side, his need to be closer to her forever as strong as hers. He snaked his hand up her shirt and hooked his thumb through the string of her thong.

They were quiet for several minutes. Loren wondered if Darien’s thoughts had gone to the same place as hers.

“I know I just said that I didn’t want to talk about it but...,” she began in a whisper. “What did it feel like? Dying, I mean.” Her throat tightened at the memory.

Darien shifted, the silky sheets rustling under their bodies. “I don’t know.” His voice was as quiet as hers and slightly hollow, as if the memory alone haunted him. “I was here one second and gone the next. It felt a little like sleeping but...but without any dreams.”

Loren thought it over. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It wasn’t. The worst part about it was when I woke back up and I realized what my absence had done to you. How broken you looked, how...sad. You were so sad, and it made me sad, too. And angry—I was angry at myself for leaving.” He traced the spaces between her ribs, raising a shiver on her skin. “I never would’ve left you, yet I was forced to leave you that day. I hated myself for it. I think that must be the hardest part about dying: leaving the people you care about.”

Loren drew a shaky breath, and Darien drew one also, her arm that was slung across his chest rising with the movement.

“I want to be where you are.” She knew he understood what she meant—that she wasn’t talking about right here, right now. She wasn’t talking about life, although that was true too. And it always would be.

Death, and what happened after. She didn’t know where people went after they died, because really, how could anyone know? The best she could do was hope. It was the best anyone could do.

She fell asleep with her head on Darien’s chest, the two of them slipping away at the same time. And she hoped it would be exactly like that. As easy as sleeping. And together—always together.

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Loren woke up in the night to the sound of Darien jolting out of bed in a cold sweat. It was hard to see him in the dark, especially with the sand of her own dreams still weighing down her body and mind, but he moved quickly, nearly crashing to the floor as he lurched to his feet.

She sat up, sheets and duvet ensnaring her waist, and rubbed her gritty eyes. "Darien?" she croaked.

He was pacing back and forth near the foot of the bed, the heels of his hands pressed into his closed eyes. The moonlight trickling in through the half-shut blinds illuminated the sheen of sweat on his back. His boxers clung to his skin—the only clothing item he was wearing—and his breaths were wild gasps. The harder Loren blinked her eyes, the more apparent it became that he was shaking.

Loren loosened the sheets and quilt from around her waist and kicked her feet free, swinging them over the side of the bed. When she spoke again, she kept her voice gentle. Quiet, so she wouldn't startle him or make things worse. "Darien, do you—"

But he was across the room and at the glass doors that led out onto the balcony before she could finish her sentence. He swung both doors open, the force behind his actions causing them to slam against the wall. Glass quivered, and a painting hanging beside the doors nearly came off its hook. Cool night air that smelled of jasmine rushed into the room and sent the curtains fluttering.

Loren hurried to catch up with him, the grip of sleep on her mind making it difficult to work her limbs. She almost stubbed her toe on the bedframe as she edged around it, holding her hands out in front of her to keep from smashing into things, and made her way to the open doors.

She found him just outside, near the railing. His head was bowed, and he was gripping the wrought-iron, his knuckles showing stark-white through his skin. The moon was full tonight, the bright glow making it easier for Loren to see, but harder for her to choke down the truth of what stood before her.

She hated seeing him like this. No matter how many nights he jolted awake, it never got easier. In fact, it got harder. She had been staying in his suite since Kalendae, and although those nights were few in number, most of them had been spent like this. Seeing him weighed down by such emotional and mental anguish shredded her heart worse than any physical pain ever could. And to think he had been dealing with this by himself, and for so many years...

She cut off the thought; it was too painful to bear. What Darien needed right now was for her to be strong enough to lift some of the

weight that was crushing him, so that was what she would do. She would do it every day for the rest of her life if he needed her to.

Darien released the railing and turned around to face her. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked physically drained. His features were burdened with a guilt she knew was growing heavier by the day.

Slowly, he lowered himself to the floor of the balcony and leaned back against the wrought-iron roses and vines. After a quiet moment, he tipped his head back, elbows resting on his propped-up knees, and closed his eyes again. He seemed to be focusing on breathing, on calming himself down with every exhalation.

Loren had been there before—too many times. She knew how it felt to have her mind gripped by a panic attack, how hard it was to assemble your thoughts and emotions when your soul was being ripped to shreds and you felt...mentally unhinged. Unstable. Broken in more ways than you could possibly fix.

She was careful to keep her footsteps light as she padded across the balcony, the cool temperature seeping into her bare feet. Slowly, she lowered herself to a crouch before him and set a hand on his knee. “Did you have another nightmare?” she whispered.

He kept his eyes shut tight, but he nodded once, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

She had forgotten to light the candles. It was something Darien had been reluctant to admit to her when they’d started sleeping in the same bed—his need to have some form of light in the room to help keep his nightmares and Surges at bay. It almost never worked the way he hoped, but she understood that it was his safety net—better to have one than not. After seeing the shame written on his face upon confessing this truth to her, she had vowed to light the candles every night, so that he wouldn’t have to.

And she had forgotten.

“It was another memory,” Darien choked out. “I was a teenager. Ivy came into my room with Soot—she was still a puppy back then. They were trying to get away from my parents and their fighting—” He swallowed, his mouth forming a tight line. As the seconds ticked by, Loren realized he wasn’t ready to say anything more about the dream.

She crawled forward and wedged herself between his legs. He was reluctant to let her in, as he always was during a Surge, but eventually he allowed her to curl her body against his, allowed her to lay her head against his chest. His heart thundered under her ear, and although the night was cool, his skin was boiling and sticky with sweat.

“I want you to try to picture it.” Her words were barely audible, but she knew he heard them. With effort, she looped her fingers

through his, the tension in his hand nearly preventing her from doing so. "The ocean. Do you see it?"

His eyes were now shut, and so were hers, but she felt him nod. Loren drew a deep breath, and Darien mirrored it, his chest shuddering under her cheek.

"I want you to count backwards from a hundred with me," she whispered. "Okay?" She lightly squeezed his rough fingers, and he squeezed back.

Together, they counted. From one hundred to one, each number they uttered in unison a soft and barely audible breath. Aside from their counting, the only other sound in the night was the wind wending through the yard. What began as a gentle breeze soon turned into gusts that cooled Darien's skin. Jasmine shrubs rustled, the brass windchimes that hung from the roof of the veranda below tinkling.

Loren focused every part of her mind on her magic, trying desperately to call upon it like she had in the past, during the few times when she had managed to help Darien with his Surges. But that power inside her didn't answer her plea, and the solar-shaped conduit tucked beneath her pajama shirt stayed cold as ice against her chest.

By the time they'd counted down to one, Darien's breathing had slowed, and so had his erratic heartrate.

Hopeful, she tipped her head back and peered up at him, only to find that his eyes—now open—were solid black. Rage had replaced his suffering, his face a cold mask.

It was in that moment that Loren knew her efforts could not reach him tonight.

She ran her thumb across his knuckles, feeling the ridges of scars flecking his skin. "You can go if you need to," she whispered.

It took a moment for Darien to react to her statement. Eventually, he blinked, as if shaking his mind free of a dream, and tipped his head down, his eyes meeting hers. He made to reach for her face with his free hand but stopped, clearly not trusting himself in this moment. It was a foolish thing—his distrust for himself. He'd never done anything to hurt her. Not once, not even close.

"I'll stay." Slowly, he lowered the hand that was still frozen in the air between them to his knee, fingers curling into a fist, a couple joints cracking from force. "I'll try to stay."

And he *did* try. He tried really hard. They returned to bed together, lighting the candles on their way. They left the doors ajar for fresh air and to lessen any feelings of being trapped.

Barely thirty minutes passed before he was pushing to his feet again and striding into the walk-in closet. When he came back out, he was dressed in the same clothes he always wore to the Pit. A long-sleeved gray henley, jeans that were ripped and bloodstained, and

black combat boots cracking from wear. The strap of the duffel bag Loren knew was filled with weapons, Stygian salts, and several changes of clothes was slung over his shoulder.

With the room now candlelit, Loren could see his features as he stopped beside the bed and lightly squeezed her foot through the sheets.

“I have to go, Lola.” The words were hoarse and burdened with regret. “I’m sorry.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat. “Just go,” she urged softly. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

He left without another word, closing the door quietly behind him.

Loren rolled onto her side and tucked the duvet up to her chin, listening for the sounds that would indicate that he had left the house. With the audio-blocking spells Mortifer usually kept blanketing Hell’s Gate, it was hard to hear anything outside the walls. But she picked up on the faint sound of his car growling to a start, and the even fainter sound of it accelerating as he took off into the night.

He didn’t have anything to be sorry for. None of this was his fault.

But Loren was sorry she couldn’t help him. Her magic was gone, and without it, she had never felt so useless.

Darien drove the streets for a long time, trying to shake the Surge without the need to enter the Pit. But the more time passed, the harder it became to resist the urge to fight, to break bones and draw blood and hit things until his knuckles were split open and raw.

He was nearing the Meatpacking District when he swerved into the small parking lot of a convenience store on Redwater Street. The neon sign mounted above the doors read 24/7 Stop, nearly every letter and two of the numbers burnt out. In the center of the lot was a cluster of charging stations for vehicles, the cristala coated in grime and a patchwork of spray paint.

The car dipped into a pothole, causing the headlights to bounce and illuminate the area. He narrowly missed the propane tank at the side of the dilapidated building as he screeched to a halt.

Darien cut the engine, unbuckled his seatbelt, and got out of the car, slamming the door shut behind him. The chirping of the alarm system as it engaged was like nails clawing his eardrums to bloody shreds.

The bricks on this side of the store were stained with old and fresh graffiti, and young demons sifted through the contents of a nearby dumpster, hissing and grappling with one another for scraps. Several teenaged vampires watched from where they sat smoking on the curb, skateboards discarded at their feet. In the moonlight, their faces were so colorless, they looked like corpses. The thick odor of vanilla-flavored blunts filled the night air as Darien swept up to the barred door and swung it open, making a point not to look at his reflection in the glass.

The bells hanging from the bars on the door chimed, declaring his entry. The sound not only grated on his nerves, just like his car's alarm system, but also made it a challenge to blink the Sight out of his vision, the black of his eyes drawing the attention of the lone employee standing behind the counter. The middle-aged, half-human male set down today's issue of the Daystar and tracked Darien with a wary gaze.

Darien paid him no mind and made for the magazine aisle. He paced up and down the length of it, hands buried deep in the pockets of his ripped and bloodied jeans.

Ah, shit—his jeans. As if the color of his eyes wasn't bad enough, he'd come in here wearing jeans that were stained with the blood of

not just vampires, werewolves, and warlocks, but nearly every breed of demon in the book. The last thing he needed right now was to get arrested for walking around looking like he'd committed a mass murder and rolled in the blood of his victims.

He edged around a rack that was stuffed with bags of potato chips and headed over to the row of coolers. He swung one open, resisting the urge to stick his head inside the icy interior as he grabbed a soda, not bothering to read the label. As he headed to the front to pay, he managed to fully contain his Sight, though he was gripping the glass bottle so hard, it was a miracle it didn't shatter from the pressure.

The clerk gaped as Darien strode up to the counter, set down the bottle, and asked for his usual brand of cigarettes, having already burned through the whole pack he'd purchased earlier. So much for quitting.

The man didn't move or blink.

Darien gave an upward flick of his brows, but the man was frozen in place. The name tag pinned to his button-up shirt was faded, the letters barely legible.

"Today, Greg," Darien said. He snapped his fingers and waved a prompting hand, causing the man to flinch. "Hop to it."

Greg turned and lumbered up to where he kept the cigarettes. It took him a painfully long time to sift through the cartons, and as the seconds ticked by, and he still hadn't found the right brand, Darien shifted with impatience, fingers drumming the counter.

"To your left," Darien instructed. The man's hand fluttered to the right. "No, no, your *other* left. There you go."

The man plucked one off the shelf, knocking a couple others to the floor in the process, and thumped back over to the register. He rang up the items, the click of each key and the beep of each barcode passing under the scanner unbearably loud.

As he waited, Darien scanned the store. The bulk candy bins, the shelves of chocolate bars and gum, the electronic cigarette display, the dusty fan that did nothing to cool the stuffy room, the shave ice machine whirring in a corner...

Darien felt a smile tug at his mouth as he read the list of available flavors of shave ice.

Cherry or peach would do.

He faced the clerk. "Does your shave ice melt?"

The man stared at him, hand hovering over the buttons on the till.

Darien narrowed his eyes. "Your shave ice, does it melt?"

The man gave a faint nod.

"Lame." He would have to make a point of bringing some home to Mortifer another time. The Hob would no doubt appreciate a change from the plain ice chips he munched on night and day. Darien would



be willing to bet the Avenue of the Scarlet Star would sell enchanted shave ice. It was far more likely to find such a thing at a tourist attraction than a convenience store, especially one this close to the Meatpacking District, the smell of blood and butchered flesh permeating the building.

Greg was still staring at him, regardless that he'd finished scanning his items seconds ago.

Darien sighed through his nose. "Look, man. If there's something you want to say, say it. I don't got all night." Once again, he was met with silence and gawking. "Well, what is it? Do you want an autograph or something?" An autograph—wouldn't that be the day? Though he wouldn't really be surprised; there were people who idolized Darkslayers the same way they idolized the faces they regularly saw on television.

Greg peered at him over the top of his small round glasses.

Darien tried to see himself from the man's perspective—bloodstained jeans, ripped gray henley, steel devil's head rings partially concealing the ink on his knuckles, the fine chains around his neck, the tattoo of the Seven Devils below his ear... Yeah, he could understand why Greg was fumbling over his words, but that didn't make it any less annoying.

Finally, he spoke, his voice a low rumble, every word blending into one. "Which Devil are you?"

Darien's brows pulled together. "Darien."

Greg checked his total on the small till screen. "That'll be fifteen seventy-eight."

Darien took out his phone to pay. The man placed the machine on the counter before him.

"Is there a reason you're asking?" Darien paid for his things with the tapping of his phone against the screen. "You look like there's a reason you're asking."

"It's nothing." He waved a hand in dismissal and ripped the receipt that sprouted from the printer next to the till.

The man's aura appeared in a flicker as the Surge Darien was repressing attempted to make an appearance. "You did *not* just waste this much of my time only to tell me that it's nothing. Spit it out, guy."

He placed the receipt on top of the cigarettes. "Some folks out in Whitebridge have run into trouble with a monster near their property."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Big trouble." Sweat beaded on his forehead. "They say it's unlike anything they've ever seen. A new creature that hypnotizes its prey before stringing them upside down and drinking the blood from

them.”

“Sounds a little like a vampire.” Aside from the part about stringing prey upside down, but some vampires had their kinks. “Are you sure you’re not confused?”

“No confusion here. It has wings, but it isn’t a vamp. It’s been killing all their livestock. They’re worried the spells on the house won’t keep it out for long.” The longer he spoke, the more his breathing shifted toward a pant. “It’s something new, I’m telling you. Nothing like it has been seen before, at least not around here.”

“I highly doubt it’s a new demon.” But Darien’s mind flashed to the missing girls who had been turned into monsters by the Arcanum Well replica—mutated by the curse. Was there a possibility that this new creature the clerk spoke of had anything to do with that? He hoped it didn’t, but with everything he’d seen lately... Well, there wasn’t a lot that could surprise him anymore. And if he was being honest with himself, this task might be exactly the kind of thing he needed tonight. “What’s their address?”

Greg waved the question away. “Don’t bother. They don’t have the money to pay someone like you. They can’t even afford Budget Pest Removal.” Budget Pest Removal was a joke, just like their name. They couldn’t catch a rat if they tried, let alone a demon, even one of the small guys that were chewing on garbage out back at this very second.

“Just give me the address, and I’ll worry about the numbers.”

Greg studied him over the top of his glasses again. “You serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. Write it down for me.”

He promptly grabbed a pen and a sticky note, scrawled down the address, and handed it over.

Darien snatched it out of his thick fingers. “Thanks, Greg. You’re doing me a favor.” There would be no Pit for him tonight, no screaming audience, no Antonio Perez clapping him on the back, as if fighting in that cesspool was something to be proud of. He winked at Greg, grabbed his items, and made for the door. “Have a lovely night.”

—

The drive to the rural community of Whitebridge took over an hour. Darien kept the windows down, the cool evening air rushing into the car in gusts that caught in his hair and clothes.

As he sped down the highway, he concentrated on breathing deeply, the fresh scent of rain-dampened earth and the spice of night-blooming flowers filling his lungs. He used Loren’s trick of counting backwards from a hundred, which did wonders at keeping him calm, as if she was right there with him, talking him out of the dark.

She was the sweetest thing for trying to help him, and it killed him

that he'd had to leave. The thought of her sleeping alone in his bed, night after goddamn night, while he left the house to kill, to shed the blood of monsters and criminals when he should be beside her instead, giving her the kind of love and attention she deserved...

He forced the thought out of his mind and returned to counting backwards, starting over from one hundred. Staying calm was a must when he was behind the wheel.

According to the navigational system displayed on the screen that was set in the dash, he wasn't far away now. Another few minutes, and he would be able to cut a monster into tiny pieces and get rid of this Surge once and for all.

What a thought to have. Normal people didn't look forward to ripping apart sentient creatures to curb the darkness festering inside them. Normal people didn't need to leave their woman in the dead of night to go to fighting rings only to emerge hours later, covered in blood that wasn't their own.

His eyes flashed to the rear-view mirror—the eyes that sometimes felt like they belonged to a stranger.

He smacked the mirror aside with the back of his hand and slumped against his door. "You're a joke," he muttered. "Just like your dad."

Eventually, he reached the address the clerk had given him. It was an old farmhouse on a dirt road in the middle of ass-fuck nowhere, complete with a chicken coop, a red barn, and a flowerbed to go with the endless, rolling fields of crops. Despite how different it was from the lively atmosphere of the city, he had to admit it held a certain charm.

Darien got out of the car and made his way to the back of it. The crunch of dirt beneath his boots was the only sound in the area, and it carried far. He popped open the trunk with the remote and lifted the mat and hardboard to reveal a compartment underneath. It was where he kept most of his weapons, the magic spells that made them invisible to the naked eye fading away as soon as they recognized his touch.

"You're going to need all of those."

Darien jolted at the sound of the voice. Forming a fist with his right hand, he whirled on a heel, wound his arm back—

And froze. Right in the nick of time.

"Shit, old man," Darien breathed.

A rail-thin human in his late sixties was shuffling toward him, hunting rifle dangling from his shoulder. The weapon was useless. Laughable, even. Demons were the most common form of danger in secluded areas like Whitebridge; a rifle like this wouldn't do shit.

Darien lowered his arm and loosened his fist, his tense fingers

barely cooperating, as if they wanted to be in a fighting ring just as badly as he did. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," Darien said. "I almost decked you." If he had, he certainly would've killed the guy, he was that old and brittle.

The man paused beside him, closer than most people dared to get, especially considering his eyes were black again. The eyes of a demon—a monster who struggled to control himself. A demon who hunted demons. What irony.

Darien wasn't sure where people went after they died, but he hoped his mother wasn't burdened with having to look down upon her failure of a son. Before she died, she had done her best to steer him away from Randal's path and onto a better one, a life without needless bloodshed. Somewhere along the way, he'd got lost, and most days, when he looked in the mirror, he couldn't tell if he was looking at himself or his dad.

"You're having a Surge," the man said, his tone heavy with understanding. "Aren't you, son?"

Darien busied himself with the contents of the trunk. "Look, buddy, let's not make this personal. I'm here to slay, not talk." He sensed the man nodding, his aura taking on a warmth that suggested he felt sorry for Darien. Darien tried not to be irritated by this, but he didn't want sympathy. He wanted... He wasn't sure what he wanted.

"Are you Darien or Travis?"

Darien blinked his thoughts away and refocused on the situation at hand. "What?" Realizing what the man had asked before he had a chance to repeat it, Darien replied, "I'm Darien."

"I heard you look alike."

Darien selected a pistol from the compartment and loaded up the cartridge with ammunition. "I've heard that, too."

"I'm Bill." When Darien didn't say anything, Bill repeated, "You're going to need all of those."

Darien managed to blink the Sight away as he glanced over his shoulder, taking in the solemn look on the man's face without the colors of his aura getting in the way. Although some might argue that the Sight made you able to see better, sometimes it was nothing but a distraction, like wearing a pair of glasses with the wrong prescription in the lenses.

"I don't doubt how good you are in your line of work," Bill said. "But trust me when I say you're going to want a good assortment of those weapons on your person when you take this thing down." His thin mouth curled into a thoughtful frown. "Who sent you, anyway?"

"A guy named Greg. Works at 24/7 Stop on Redwater." Darien set the pistol aside and loaded up another. "Where's this thing hiding?"

Bill pointed a wrinkled finger across the moor. "By the fig tree."

Darien frowned. "The Crossroads?"

Across the dark grounds sat a massive Strangler Fig, so close to the dense treeline that its silhouette blended in until it was nearly invisible.

"What of the Soul-eater?" Darien asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bill shrug. The strap of the rifle slipped off his shoulder, but he caught it before it could fall. "I don't go near the Crossroads. I'm assuming she's still in there."

Something didn't add up. The Nameless didn't share their dens, so he was either following a false lead and there was no new monster out here, or something had happened to the creature that lived at this Crossroads. He couldn't imagine what; those things were very hard to kill.

Bill said, "You got coins?"

Darien flashed him the two coins he'd stuffed into his back pocket, along with the single dove's feather. He was lucky he'd found one in the tin he kept under the driver's seat; the offerings were getting low, along with the coins in the bowl back at Hell's Gate. It was nearly time to stock up. Each Crossroads had their own requirements; while some only asked for coins, others desired a specific bird's feather, a berry, a gemstone, bones, animal teeth, claws or talons, the pieces of a clock.

There was one Crossroads near the city of Yveswich that asked for nothing save a memory of the gatekeeper's choosing. Darien would avoid that place for the rest of his life, so long as he could help it. There was something about a Crossroads that stipulated such a personal offering from its visitors that didn't sit well with Darien.

He was about to shut the trunk when something caught his eye.

The onyx ring Arthur had given him from the Fleet weaponry was lodged between two guns in the compartment of the trunk. A friend of Arthur's had recently repaired the damage done to the magic-enforced bodysuit—the damage caused by the explosion of the Arcanum Well replica. Now, it had barely a scratch on it.

Darien wasn't sure why he did it, but he grabbed the ring and put it on, turning it counter-clockwise.

Bill stumbled back as the sleek black armor spread across Darien's body, fitting him like a glove. The protective spellwork snapped into place, buzzing across his skin like a blanket of electricity.

A low whistle slipped through Bill's lips. "That's one fancy bauble."

Darien filled the weapons belt on the bodysuit with the assortment of guns and closed the trunk, the *thump* echoing across the rolling fields.

And then he made his way over to the fig tree. The man didn't follow, though Darien could feel him tracking his every step.

The Strangler Fig was massive. An aggressive root system tunneled into the soil, protruding up here and there in twisting loops. A sight as beautiful as it was disturbing, it was like something straight out of a fairy-tale, save the soul-eating witch that dwelled below the ground at his feet.

When he made it across the field, the colossal tree looming out of the darkness, he saw that the base of the trunk was ringed with colorful mushrooms.

Darien crouched before the haunting face that was carved into the wood. The eyes were nothing but gouges, sticky golden sap that reeked of sulfur and corpse flowers dripping from the holes like tears.

He took the two coins and pressed them, one after the other, into the eye sockets of the carved tree. The next step was the feather, which he placed in the grass at the base of the trunk.

As soon as the feather touched ground, the wind and the rustle of nocturnal wildlife died, a quilt of silence dropping over the property.

When Darien spoke, there was a hollow echo to his words, as if he were talking through a pipe. Something was listening on the other end—he just didn't know what.

“Ring around the Strangler Tree,  
Two pieces of silver form the key.  
Open your door to me,  
Let me see.  
Show me the way,  
Let me see.”

A moment of silence fell, heavier than the one that had preceded it.  
And then the earth split open beneath his feet.

He stood and backed up as the soil fell away in moisture-laden clumps. The tree roots moved like snakes, winding up into tight coils that parted to either side, a dark doorway opening into the ground.

Adrenaline thrummed in his blood as he leapt into the shadowy bowels of the Crossroads and prepared to face what lurked within.

The tunnel beneath the Strangler Fig was choked by a heavy blanket of unusual silence. Darien could hear his own blood moving through his veins, could hear every steady thump of his heart as he walked through darkness that was black as pitch.

This place was filthier than the Widow's habitat. Filthier, even, than the Fawn's, a creature he'd visited only once before, beneath a fig tree that was very different from this one. Less...eerie. Less filthy. The air was thick with ammonia and decay, making the nausea swirling in his gut from the Surge even harder to bear. Bile rose to coat his tongue, the taste bitter and revolting. There wasn't a hint of space on the ground that wasn't littered with the bones of animals and men; clothes and weapons; jewelry and various kinds of past offerings, all of them black with rust or mold. It looked like the inside of Blackgate Manor.

Forcing down the recent memories that crept to the surface of his mind at the thought of that manor, Darien took a deep breath. The medley of smells rushing through his airways made him nearly gag, but he choked back the urge and focused, searching for hints that might tell him where to find the witch or the monster, if they truly weren't one and the same. But the air was too cloying, and if either of the creatures was down here, their scents were impossible to separate from the rot and ammonia. So he used his Sight instead.

Eyes wholly black, he took in the tunnel, thoroughly scanning several feet at a time. His surroundings were even darker than when he wasn't using the Sight, only the subtle glow of insects and tree roots visible, like a thermal camera. No sign of the witch or a new winged creature.

He kept walking, his distance from the exit increasing with every step.

Eventually, he reached a curve in the tunnel, where a pool of stagnant water shimmered like black ink, the surface disrupted by a lone drip from the ceiling. There was no sign of life in there, no obvious reason as to why he should stop, but something compelled him to pause, his boots inches from the edge.

There was no aura. No flicker of heat. But he could have sworn something was watching him from under the water, and it wasn't a feeling he was willing to ignore. There was a chill on his neck, as if something was breathing on the back of it, baiting him to turn and

look.

He knew better than to fall for that trick.

*What are you?* came a slithering voice. The question was not a sound that reached his ears; it was a thought that didn't belong to him, slicing into his mind like an unbidden guest.

Darien tensed, the chill on the back of his neck spreading.

This was new, he had to admit. Maybe Greg at 24/7 Stop wasn't so wrong after all.

*A monster hunter*, Darien replied. Bandit was standing at attention in his shadow, the spirit being careful to keep his own mind blank. It was a smart move; Darien had trained him well.

The thing lurking in the water stirred. Darien didn't allow himself to be shaken by the fact that this creature could hear his thoughts, but...again, this was new. For this reason, he kept his head empty of all thoughts, except for what he wanted this thing to hear. Giving it any advantage over him, no matter how small, would be a rookie mistake.

Silence stretched between them. There was a shift in the air that suggested a death was being calculated.

Darien was calculating a death of his own, hand drifting toward his weapons belt, as he said, *What are you?*

A pause. *I have no name.*

*Are you the Soul-eater?*

The pool trembled, a ripple of rings drifting out from its center, expanding the closer they got to the edge. The muted colors staining the rings reminded him of an oil slick. The damp ceiling of the tunnel reflected the water like a mirror, making it look like there were two pools instead of one. The tree roots that hung down from the earth above in loops and forks were glowing. The light was teal and very subtle, the glow nearly undetectable by both his regular vision and his Sight.

*The Soul-eater is gone*, said the voice, drawing Darien's attention away from the glowing roots. The statement was followed by a giggle that sounded less like a monster and more like a child.

The chill that had started on Darien's neck spread down his spine, a peculiar feeling that made him hesitant to even blink. *Did you kill her?*

The water rippled again. *I helped her cross.*

*By killing her.* There was another ghostly chuckle, this one so quiet, he barely heard it. *Did you believe you were helping her?*

*All souls, whether lost or found, must cross the River when it is their time. How lucky it is that another has come to me tonight. And you are lost, aren't you, Monster Hunter? So very lost.*

His stomach churned at the meaning in the creature's words—the



barely concealed threat.

The creature crooned, *Tell me, Monster Hunter. Where is this monster that you've come to end?*

*I'm not certain I've found it yet.* He kept his tone playful, taunting the creature, as it was taunting him. *Are you a monster?*

*If I answered yes, would you have to kill me?*

*That depends. Come out. Let me look upon the creature who managed to kill a Crossroads witch.*

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." The sound reverberated from deep in the gullet of the tunnel—a sentence spoken aloud this time, the voice hoarse and high-pitched.

Darien turned toward the voice, hand drifting toward his gun.

He didn't even have a chance to pull it out of the holster before the thing was bursting out of the water and launching him into the wall.

—

Darien was thrown into the wall so hard the air was crushed from his lungs. Soil fell from the roof of the tunnel and stung his eyes.

With his chest screaming in agony, it was a miracle he managed to land on his feet in a crouching position. The shift of bones under his boots nearly caused him to lose his footing, but he leaned into the movement, one hand pressed against his aching chest while the other worked at maintaining his balance, fingers splayed in the air at his side.

Years had passed since he'd had the wind knocked out of him. Years, but the memory of how it felt had never left him—the tight burning in his chest that was like razor blades shredding the muscles into a pulp, the battle to draw a single wisp of air as his diaphragm was rendered useless, the way his lungs refused to inflate. Rarely did anyone get the better of him like this. His shock alone was enough to incapacitate him, never mind his sudden inability to breathe.

Bandit was nudging him, silently asking for instructions, but Darien couldn't even form a reply in his thoughts, nor did he want to. If he had to use Bandit as a form of attack, it would be best if the creature remained unaware of his existence until then.

Another few seconds passed before he was able to suck in a lungful of air. Precious oxygen flooded his airways, easing the burning ache in his chest and throat. He took another breath, chest expanding, and blew it out through his mouth.

Able to focus at last, he drew a pistol from where it was strapped to his thigh and stared into the dark tunnel, watching for any sign of movement.

Where the hell did she go? Using his Sight, he scanned the area as

he straightened out of his crouch, bones clacking underfoot, and took the safety off the gun.

The pool of water was still rippling, and the tree roots were still glowing, brighter now than before. They pulsed, shining and then dimming, shining and then dimming.

A shadowy blur came at him from his left, and he dodged the attack right in the nick of time.

But another attack came—this one from behind him—and the gun was knocked out of his grasp. Pain bloomed through his wrist where the monster had struck.

He pulled another gun out of his belt and fired. His aim was precise as ever, but none of the bullets struck true. The thing dodged every round he emptied from three pistols, one after the other. The sound of her screeching and maniacal laughter clawed at his eardrums and rattled his brain in his skull.

As she swept from side to side, leathery wings tearing up a storm that sent debris flying, he managed to catalogue her appearance, sifting through his memory for a breed that fit.

The skin covering her slender form was papery and translucent, her veins and organs visible through it. Her eyes were black, the skin around them webbed with dark lines, a small stone that looked like an onyx stud embedded in the skin of her forehead. Her ears were pointed, her sharp teeth as plentiful as an eel's. While she looked somewhat like a vampire in hunting form, the spikes protruding from the length of her spine, along with the lack of hair on her head, confirmed she was something different.

She canted her head, her eyes turning wholly white as she assessed him. "Death," she uttered. Her voice was metallic and distant, and it vibrated through the air like a struck bell. "Death and the dark aura."

*What the fuck?* Darien thought.

And then she vanished. There one moment and gone the next, as if she could turn invisible.

That explained how she managed to keep sneaking up on him.

Even with his Sight, she was invisible. He couldn't see a single trace of her as he scanned the tunnels, keeping his feet light, gun at the ready as he moved. For all the good his Sight was doing him, he might as well have been blind.

There was a slight shift in the area, a barely detectable change that felt like a cold breeze before something slammed onto his head.

Darien shouted out and instinctively pulled the trigger, firing at the creature that was suddenly perched on his shoulders like a massive bird, clawed feet ripping into the Fleet bodysuit as they dug in.

The bullets were doing no good. He couldn't hit her, and every shot he fired only created noise, debris, and flashes of distracting light

that made his Surge kick up a fuss.

So he ditched the gun, holstering it near his hip.

Reaching behind his head, he grabbed hold of her throat and pulled her over his shoulder, throwing her to the ground before him. Her wings snapped out, the clawed points swiping for his arteries.

He jumped onto the ground and straddled her chest, pinning her in place, knees holding down her wings. Gun in hand again, he aimed—

Just as he pulled the trigger, bullet heading straight for her skull, she melted into the ground and vanished out of sight. The shot connected with the bones piled up on the ground instead, shattering them with an ear-splitting crack, dust clouding the air.

Darien blinked. “What the hell?” he panted.

Another of those ghostly chuckles slithered through the tunnel.

*You’re not very good at killing. Are you, Monster Hunter?*

“I was,” Darien said, “until I met you.”

*No matter how big and bad you think you are,* the creature crooned, *there is always someone who can play the cards better than you.* The statement was vaguely familiar. He’d heard it before, but where? And from whose mouth?

Darien kept turning to the sound of the voice, searching for her in the darkness, gun always at the ready.

Just as she had before, when she reappeared again, it was from the opposite direction to which he was looking.

She charged out of the shadows with a screech and threw him to the ground, gun clattering into the piles of bones just out of reach. He grunted, bones and rocks shifting beneath him, the heap of them threatening to swallow him whole.

With his arms pinned beneath her claws, her brute strength keeping him from moving so much as an inch, Darien began to realize that he might’ve finally met his match.

Especially as the creature’s eyes began to glow like diamonds in the sun, illuminating the tunnel with a light that was blinding. She hissed, spitting saliva at him.

Not saliva—venom.

Suddenly, his skin was on fire. The venom melted right through the spells protecting him, right through the thick material of the Fleet bodysuit and the shirt he wore underneath. The magic protecting him shimmered like a flame dying in a gust of wind—

And then it vanished entirely, leaving him vulnerable and exposed, as if he’d walked into this Crossroads wearing nothing but a t-shirt.

Darien shouted out as the burning sensation spread.

It was scalding. It felt like acid had been thrown onto his chest, his neck, his face. It felt like slapping your bare hand onto an element that was cranked to the highest heat and holding it there, feeling the

flesh melt off your bones, and then peeling what remained of your mutilated hand off the red-hot coils.

It fucking hurt. And the creature was about to strike again.

He reached for a weapon, for anything that might help him, anything within reach. *Anything.*

*I love you, Darien,* the demon said with the voice of an angel.

Loren's voice.

And he realized...what the creature had said a moment ago had come from his own thoughts. Straight from his memories of when he'd met the Butcher on the Iron Dock.

The monster smiled wide, the skin of her cheeks splitting right up to the outer corners of her white eyes. Her skin webbed, hanging in strings between her jaws. She laughed, gums pulsing around her teeth.

It was Loren's laugh.

To hell with this shit. Now, he was angry.

His fingers closed around a sharp object discarded in the dirt. Without a glance to see what it was, he moved.

Winding his arm back, he struck, cutting right through her esophagus with a long shard of what looked like volcanic glass. It gleamed in the ghostly light of the tree roots, a wicked smile to match this wicked place.

The thing began to scream. An awful, high-pitched wailing that vibrated his eardrums. She reeled back, clawing at her throat in a useless attempt to stifle the black blood spurting from the wound, the bones at her feet fizzing as it melted through them.

With a shout of anger and determination, Darien pushed himself to his feet. He limped across the lair, bones clacking under his boots. The creature tried to run from him, her wide eyes—black again, no longer white or glowing—fixed on the weapon in his hand.

The shard glinted in the air as he wound it back. "Go back to hell, you fucking bitch," Darien bit out.

And then he cut off her head. The black glass sliced through her skin with such ease that he barely felt the impact, though his skin tingled from his fingertips to his elbow, as if he'd banged the ulnar nerve on a hard surface.

The light in her depthless eyes faded, her grotesque features going slack in death. The head dropped to the ground first, followed by the body. Blood spread into the earth, a great puddle of fizzling black goo.

Darien stepped back, back, back—until he was met with the tunnel wall, the damp soil seeping into his skin through the rips in the bodysuit.

For a long time, he stood there, gasping for breath, trying to grasp what in the hell just happened.

She had used Loren's voice. Stolen his memories. Listened to his

thoughts without permission. He had no idea what to think, but suddenly, he couldn't wait to get out of here.

Pushing away from the wall, he found a lighter in his pocket and lit the corpse on fire.

The creature's papery skin ignited quickly, the flames turning black, blue, and green. The tree roots hanging from the ceiling shrank away from the fire, retreating into the earth above, the ghostly glow of the wood fading to a dimmer color. The walls shied away from the blaze too, groaning and crunching and rippling, a high-pitched sound resembling a scream drifting through the tunnel.

Darien glanced down at his chest, where the creature's venom had melted a gaping hole through the bodysuit. His skin was blistering and raw, the ink Kyle had begun on his chest just the other day nearly ruined. And it *would* be ruined, if he didn't find a way to keep it from scarring.

Darien pushed his hair back from his face, fingers curling into a fist against his scalp. "Fucking bitch."

That bitch had ruined his tattoo.

—

Where he sat on the couch in the sitting room at Hell's Gate, Darien held very still as Loren applied a layer of healing salve to the wounds on his chest. She was kneeling on the floor between his legs, her touch so light and careful he barely felt it.

The salve smelled of eucalyptus and peppermint. It left a pleasant, cooling sensation on his skin, the plant extracts instantly calming the blisters and caustic burns.

Darien watched Loren while she worked. Damn, she was nice to look at. The sight of her made the pain disappear faster than the salve.

Mortifer was watching Loren apply the salve too. He was perched on the back of the couch behind Darien's head, his fiery face scrunching up with disgust whenever he caught a whiff of the salve. Bandit was sprawled on the rug with Soot and Noble, his back legs kicked out under the coffee table, his prized rubber chicken lying nearby. The Familiar was trying to play it cool, but Darien could sense through their Spirit Bond that he was more concerned than he was letting on.

*Should've let me help,* Bandit grumbled.

Darien forced himself to look away from Loren so he could glance at Bandit. *I didn't want that thing to know you existed unless your help became necessary.*

*You're just too proud to ask for assistance when you need it. It'll be the death of you, you know.*

*Maybe*, Darien replied, his focus returning to Loren. *But not today.*

Tanner, Max, and Ivy were the only Devils in the house who were awake and unoccupied. They were standing near the couch, watching in silence, eyes bleary with exhaustion. The three of them had woken up when Darien had made it home and limped up the stairs. Apparently, he hadn't succeeded at moving as quietly as he'd thought.

"You guys can go back to sleep," he offered, ignoring the pain that zipped through him when Loren moved onto another patch of blistered skin, this one worse than the rest. "I'm fine."

"Not a chance," Ivy said, her voice firm. She turned to Maximus and Tanner. "When was the last time he came home hissing in pain and waking everyone up?" She looked back at Darien with a cheeky expression. "Oh, that's right: *never*." Although her tone said otherwise, Darien could see the concern shining in her eyes.

He didn't blame her for being worried. After all, she spoke the truth: rarely did he ever come home looking like this.

Max said, "I seem to remember him pissing and moaning after a bar fight last year." His broad shoulders shook with a chuckle.

"Hey," Darien protested. "It was eight against one, and I was so plastered I couldn't even see straight. I got my ass handed to me, so my pissing and moaning was justified, thank you very much."

Tanner sat down on the arm of the couch and crossed his ankles. "I thought you said Dominic was there."

"Dominic was so high, he was standing by the bar taking swings at his reflection until someone pushed his head through the mirror." The others burst into laughter. Darien added, "Don't tell him I told you that." The Angel was staying the night. He was on the top floor, too far away to hear this conversation. Blue had the room right beside his, and she was being monitored by Familiars and Devils that were taking shifts.

Loren eyed him with a mixture of humor and disapproval.

Darien laughed, shoulders shaking with amusement.

She swatted his arm. "Don't move," she scolded.

Tanner said, "Reminds me of that time you took out those seven kids for me at school."

"There were eight," Darien corrected. "And I won." Loren was looking up at him in question. He explained, "Tanner had just moved to town and didn't have any friends—"

The hacker cut in, "Darien saw me getting picked on, so he decided to stand up for me. The assholes had stolen my tablet."

"You won against eight of them?" Loren asked him.

"He did," Tanner said. "Only got hit once, right?" He looked at Darien.

"Twice," Darien admitted.

Tanner smiled in remembrance. "Good times."

Loren smiled up at Darien. "You're amazing," she told him.

"I've had my moments."

Loren finished up with the salve and sat back to assess her work. She popped the lid back on the tin, twisting it tight.

"It probably won't scar," she said. "But I'll have to get you some more. You'll need to apply it three times a day."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

Mortifer hopped down onto his lap to inspect the wounds, his mannerisms reminding Darien of a squirrel monkey.

"Don't worry, buddy," Darien told him. Red eyes peered up at him in concern. "I'm fine, I promise."

"What do you think that thing was?" Tanner asked around a yawn.

"I have no idea." When he spoke again, he looked his sister in the eyes first, followed by Max and Tanner. "But I don't want any of you taking jobs at the Crossroads until we find out. Understood?"

All three of them were quick to nod.

Loren was staring at the angry wounds, her teeth worrying her lower lip. "Your ink..." Her mouth twisted into a frown. "Well, I hate to say this, but it might be wrecked."

"I know," he sighed. He tipped up her chin with a knuckle. "I'm trying not to think about that."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for that, silly girl." He circled her mouth with his thumb, the sensation making her shiver. Even with the level of pain he was experiencing, the sight of that mouth brought back very recent memories of being inside there. Damn, that had felt incredible. Best blowjob he'd ever had. "Don't ever apologize."

Ivy said, "How did you kill it, Darien?"

"I used a blade I found in the tunnel. Must've been an old weapon or something."

Mortifer suddenly clambered down off the couch and padded into the entrance hall, his webbed feet making a sticking sound on the hard floor. Everybody watched in silence as the Hob leapt up onto the glass table to inspect the hand-carved bowl of coins, small fingers braced on the curved edge as he stood on his tiptoes to peer inside.

"Oh no," Max whispered with a quiet laugh, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm going back to bed." He lumbered for the entrance hall, mouth stretching open with a wide yawn.

Darien knew exactly what conclusion Max had drawn. He leaned forward on the couch, being careful not to touch his wounds, and called to Mortifer, "Stay away from those, buddy. I can't have you obsessing over them like you do your ice chips, alright? They're expensive."

Mortifer ignored him and continued to inspect the coins, likely counting how many were in there. Silver jangled softly as Mortifer's tiny fingers sifted through the pieces.

As Max passed the table, he glanced at the Hob and then back at Darien, mouth twitching with humor. "Night, everyone," he called.

"Morty," Darien warned, the nickname mingling with the others' responses to Max. The Hob turned to look at him. "I said that's enough."

Without warning, the Hob melted into the table and disappeared in a puff of smoke, the black cloud sparkling faintly with all colors of the rainbow, like gemstones under light.

Darien sighed, shaking his head.

Bandit's eyes flashed open. *If you'd like me to take a chunk out of him, I'd be happy to oblige.* He licked his chops, nose twitching as he sniffed at the air. Darien wondered where the Hob went whenever he vanished like that. He had caught Mortifer in the fireplaces a few times, as if he often found something more fascinating than ash and wood inside them.

*I'd rather you didn't,* Darien replied. *But I appreciate the offer.*

Bandit flopped onto his side and stretched out his paws, toes spreading wide. *Suit yourself, Mr. Sarcasm.*

Loren was watching Darien with curiosity. "What's he saying?"

"He wants to take a chunk out of Mortifer."

"Bad Bandit," Loren reprimanded in a quiet voice, her softly waving hair swaying as she turned to look at the Familiar.

Bandit opened one eye. *Can you please tell her I'm not like regular dogs? I don't like simple words like bad dog or roll over.*

*I will tell her no such thing, you bad dog.*

Bandit squinted his eyes. *You're insufferable.*

*I get it from you.*

"What's he saying?" Loren asked.

Darien gave her a soft smile. "He says he loves you."

Bandit glared. *Liar.*

Loren beamed at the dog. "I love you too, Bandit."

Bandit rolled his eyes.

*Watch that attitude,* Darien warned, *or I'll take that rubber chicken away.*

Bandit bristled. *Take the chicken, I riot.*

*We'll see about that.*

"Oh, I almost forgot," Loren said. She reached into the pocket of her pajama shorts and took out an Avertera talisman. "Can someone give this to Dominic when he wakes up?"

"I will," Ivy said. "I'm usually up before everyone else anyway." Ivy went for a jog every morning with Soot before the sun came up.



Darien asked Loren, "Is that for Blue?"

She nodded.

A smile fluttered across his lips. She was so incredibly selfless. "I'll get you more." He eyed the one she was wearing; there was a dusting of gold on her skin. Another couple weeks, if they were even that lucky, and the magic would probably be spent.

"You're going to go broke," she accused.

Darien grinned. "Not at the rate I collect." Seeing the concern on her face, he told her, "Gold. Remember, sweetheart? You're worth more than any amount of money to me."

The statement had her ducking her head, pink dusting her cheeks.

But she was soon suppressing a yawn, hand drifting to her half-open mouth. He felt terrible for waking her up.

He stood and helped her up off the rug. "Let's go to bed." He was more than ready to forget this night, and more than ready to be back in his suite, holding his entire world in his arms.

Loren woke up the following morning to a quiet house.

Rolling over in bed, she stifled a yawn and reached across the mattress, but her fingers were met with empty space and cold sheets.

Her eyelids fluttered open. Unless the clock on the nightstand had developed the ability to lie, it was already nine thirty. She hadn't meant to sleep so late, but after the events of yesterday and last night, it didn't surprise her that she'd slept like the dead until now.

Having Darien in bed beside her for the past few hours had certainly helped. He'd held her the whole time, his arms wrapped around her, her back pressed solidly against his front. She loved when he held her like that, keeping her safe even in her dreams. But it always made the long nights without him harder to bear.

And the mornings.

Golden light poured into the room through the slats in the blinds, the sun's rays so bright they made the enchanted candles burning on the nightstand look dim.

Squinting, she slung a hand over her eyes, debating going back to sleep for another hour. It was her weekend, so she figured she shouldn't feel guilty for getting some extra rest. And gods, her eyes were still burning, the light that was pushing through the blinds not helping.

As she debated it, she listened for signs of life in the house. But there was nothing. No music as Ivy played the piano, no distant droning of a television, no echoing voices bouncing up to her floor, no Familiars causing a ruckus by chasing each other all over the mansion.

When Loren rolled over onto her side, she spotted a pen and a wrinkled note next to the collection of vanilla candles on the nightstand.

Pushing herself up onto her elbows, she slid across the mattress, just far enough to grab what she realized was a receipt from a convenience store. *24/7 Stop*, it said. She blinked to clear her vision and read Darien's neat writing on the back of it.

*Morning, beautiful. I had to go make a collection, but I'll be back this afternoon. Max and Dom have Blue with them for the day.*

*PS. I love you, you little brat.*

*Xoxo,  
Dare*

The corners of her mouth twitched with a smile. She stared at the note for a long time, mostly at what he'd added to the end of it, as well as his name. She wasn't sure why, but the sight of his handwriting always managed to surprise her. Neater than most men, more...careful. Heck, *her* writing was messier than his.

Being careful not to wake Singer, who was curled up on his cushion by the balcony doors, Loren got out of bed and slipped the note into the top drawer of the nightstand for safekeeping, among a nest of other notes Darien had written for her in their short time together. She knew he would eventually discover them, if he hadn't already, and tease her for hanging onto them.

She found her slippers kicked partway under the bed and shoved her cold feet into them. If only Darien was home so she could warm her icy toes up on his back. He tried to insist that he hated when she did that, but something told her he was lying, especially because he didn't always flinch when she did it.

The house was silent and seemingly empty. Loren made her way to the end of the hallway and skipped down the grand staircase, humming to herself all the while. The crystals on the chandelier in the entrance hall reflected the morning sunshine, shooting flecks of rainbow and white light onto the spotless walls.

When she got down to the entrance hall, the lingering fragrance of brewed espresso, fresh pancakes, and maple syrup wafted from the kitchen, making her mouth water and her stomach growl.

She picked up her pace, hurrying past the sitting room—

And froze when she found a female Darkslayer with strawberry—blonde hair lounging in Darien's usual seat at the dining room table. Her legs were crossed, her golden summer tan dark against the white dress she was wearing. Along with her dress, she wore a fur coat—an odd choice of attire, considering the climate they lived in, even with all the rain they had been getting lately. Her right arm rested on the table, sharp nails tapping out a rhythm on the artwork—a winged devil looming over Angelthene—that was burned into the surface of the oak.

"Hello, Loren," the Warg crooned. She tucked a strand of thick hair behind her ear, revealing the crescent moon tattooed just below it. "You remember me, don't you?"

"Valary." Loren said her name on a quiet breath that told the trespasser exactly how surprised she was to see her. Her heart was pounding out an irregular rhythm she knew the Warg could hear.

"Aww." Valary pouted her glossy lips. "Why so frightened? I just

wanted to say hello.”

Loren straightened her spine. “Get out.”

A frown etched itself deep into the Warg’s pretty face. “Is that any way to treat your guest?”

“Get out,” Loren said again, the words lashing out like the crack of a whip. “You don’t have any right to be in here.”

How had she even got in? Her eyes darted to the fridge, but Mortifer was nowhere to be seen. Though Loren swore she saw a wisp of shadow behind the cereal boxes, as if the Hob had been there a moment ago but had vanished, melting into the walls or cupboards like he so often did.

Valary followed her stare and tsked. “I guess no one bothered to tell the Hob that Darien has moved onto a different piece of ass.”

Loren’s blood heated in her veins. “Go to hell.”

“Get out,” Valary squawked. “Go to hell.’ You have a very limited vocabulary, Loren.”

“I don’t need to waste my words on you. You’re trespassing, and if you don’t get the hell out—”

Valary uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet. “Oh, *do* tell me what will happen if I don’t get out,” she interrupted, her voice as fluid as her movements. “Darien will get mad at me, right? Pretty pathetic that you need to rely on a man to fight your battles for you.” She crossed the room, high heels clicking on the floor.

Loren backed into the entrance hall. She hated herself for retreating; she thought she’d moved on from this sort of behavior, but the look on Valary’s face...

There was nothing kind in it. Her smile was filled with venom, and there was a spark in her eyes that made her look deranged, like a shark scenting blood in the water. There was true danger to be felt here, and Loren would be a fool to ignore it.

Valary stopped walking.

Loren stopped, too. They were in the center of the entrance hall now, mere feet from the front doors—mere feet from each other.

The Warg’s smile grew. “I want to show you something.” Her voice was oddly quiet and gentle, as if she were consoling a crying child. Her eyes closed with one heavy blink, and when she reopened them, they were solid black.

That was when she attacked. Not physically, but it was an attack all the same.

It was an assault on her mind, the same kind of power Loren had seen Darien use on Dennis Boyd at his dive bar. Valary had entered her mind—an invasion of the worst kind—and was forcing her to see things as if she’d lived them herself. Horrible things.

The feeling was like a maggot worming into her skull, an

unwelcome presence squishing into her mind and grabbing hold of the reins, forcing her to witness things she couldn't look away from—couldn't even close her eyes to escape.

The images Valary shoved into her mind cut like bullets ripping through her soul. Each one left behind a gaping wound she feared might never heal. The images were vivid, as if she were watching a movie—a film she hated with every fibre of her being. She saw each image through Valary's eyes, as if she had lived every memory the Warg was needling into her brain.

And she wished she had. She wished she had lived these memories instead of Valary.

Because what she was seeing had only recently become her reality.

She saw the dark look of ecstasy on Darien's face as Valary knelt before him in the graffitied bathroom of a nightclub, her mouth and hand wrapped around his cock. Saw her looking at herself in the floor—to—ceiling gilt mirror beside Darien's bed—their bed, the sheets Loren tangled herself up in every night—as she got fucked from behind. Saw him on top of her in the back seat of his car, her heels on his shoulders—

A piercing scream ripped out of Loren's lungs, the crystals on the chandelier echoing it as she freed herself of Valary's grip. The influence of the Warg's magic snapped back against its bearer like a rubber band, making her stumble.

Loren took advantage of her surprise. Lightning—fast, she reached out and pushed Valary with both hands.

The Warg rolled her ankle in her heels, nearly falling to the polished floor, black fading out of her eyes.

But she recovered quickly, and soon she was lunging for Loren, an animalistic growl ripping through her bared teeth.

Loren stumbled back a step, but Valary's sharp nails caught her by the throat and pinned her in place.

She tried to draw a breath, tried to break away, but Valary's hold on her wouldn't budge. And the Warg's face was mere inches away, a look of maniacal delight in her eyes.

"You see it now, don't you?" Valary's cold laugh was more like a cackle. "*Don't you?*" Sharp nails cut into her skin. "Little bitch."

The Warg's incisors began to elongate, the ice—blue of her irises shifting to wolf—gold. Those sharp nails on her throat squeezed harder, pinching off her last wisp of air. Loren clawed at the backs of Valary's hands, but the Warg didn't flinch, not even when she drew blood.

"You're nothing new to him," Valary said, teeth still bared. "Nothing *special*. Bet you haven't even been fucked like that before."

Loren couldn't breathe. Her eyes were bugging out of her head,

and her knees were quaking, her lungs shriveling up into pulp—

A deep male voice ripped through Hell's Gate.

Valary let go.

Loren staggered over to the table. She drew in a gasping breath as she steadied herself against it, sweaty hands gripping the cold edge. The vase of flowers rattled from her shaky grip, loose petals floating to the glass surface. Sweet air flooded her aching lungs, and she coughed, her throat burning as she drew in ragged breath after ragged breath.

With a smile that was nothing short of smug, Valary held up her hands in surrender as Travis rushed down the stairs, combat boots thumping on carpet. Mortifer hung from his neck like a chain, his beady red eyes filled with concern.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Travis demanded. His fists were clenched, the tendons in his lean arms standing out beneath his skin. The pictures on the walls rattled as he stomped down the stairs.

Valary ignored him, the strange gold in her irises fading as she whipped her head around to face Loren. "He'll get tired of your cunt soon enough, you little bitch."

"That's *enough!*" Travis thundered as he reached the last step and crossed the entrance hall. He waved a hand at the door. "Get out of here, and don't let the door hit your trespassing ass on the way out."

Valary cocked a daring eyebrow. "Looks like Darien's temper has rubbed off on you, Trav."

"I never liked you, Valary," Travis said, his voice low but sharp as he stalked up to her. "The only reason I tolerated you is because Darien found you attractive enough to fuck. If you don't get out of our house, I will cut that smug look off your face. You know how I like my blades."

The threat had Loren swaying on her feet—and that smug look was indeed wiped off Valary's face.

Travis gave Valary two seconds—two seconds to leave.

When the Warg didn't budge, he exploded. "*Get out!*" he shouted, arms trembling with rage. "*NOW.*"

Loren's heart skipped a beat from the volume of his voice, and it felt like her soul jumped right out of her skin.

Valary swung open the door. Just before she slipped out onto the front steps, she hissed to Loren, "I'll be seeing you again."

Travis grabbed the door and slammed it shut behind her, nearly hitting her in the back with it.

It took him a moment before he turned around. His nostrils were flared, the fire in his eyes terrifying. "I am so sorry—" he began.

"I can't breathe, Travis," she gasped. She pressed a hand to the ache in her chest. "I can't breathe."

He came over and pulled her into an embrace, reaching her just before her legs could give out. The planet felt like it was shaking.

Mortifer peered at her from behind Travis's neck, his expression one of concern, his tiny fists gripping the Devil's hair.

"It's okay," Travis said. "It's okay."

Loren tried to speak, tried to straighten, but she could do neither. She clung to him for several minutes, concentrating on slowing her frantic breathing, until she could finally stand on her own without the help.

She slowly broke away from Travis and gripped the edge of the table again. For a long time, she stared at the polished floor, her mind a mess.

Travis waited in silence, arms crossed, until she was ready to speak.

"I'm fine," she said at last, her words hoarse. Even she could hear the lie in them. "I'm okay."

"Did she hit you? Did she do anything—"

"I'm fine, Travis. What she did to my mind was far worse than what she did to my body." She fought the sob building in her throat, the images Valary had shoved into her mind resurfacing with a vengeance.

A shadow crossed Travis's face. "What did she—" He paused, his face smoothing with realization. "She showed you her memories of Darien." He swore and rubbed a hand down his face.

"Don't tell Darien. Please. Promise me you won't tell him."

"Loren, I can't—"

"You can't tell him." She swallowed the bile burning her throat. "I want to forget about this, okay? I don't want him to know. I don't want him to have to hear about what she showed me, or he'll—"

"Alright, alright." He reached out and rubbed her shoulder. Travis didn't seem like the type to show affection, so she appreciated the gesture. "Just breathe, okay?"

She did, just like he told her to.

"Breathe," Travis said again.

Loren pushed away from the table and made for the staircase. "I'm going upstairs." Her voice sounded as weak as she felt. When she reached the first step, she grabbed onto the handrail and pulled herself up.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Travis called.

"I think I just need to be alone. Thanks, Travis."

She surprised herself by making it into Darien's suite and out onto the balcony. For a long time, she breathed the jasmine-scented air, every sweet lungful burning her aching throat. She somehow managed not to break down, but the images Valary had forced her to see were

seared into her mind, as if they had been put there with a branding iron.

They were all she saw.



“Nice place you got here, Art.”

Hands in the pockets of his brown leather jacket, Maximus tried to keep his feet light as he followed Dallas through the cluttered building, his elbows nearly taking out beakers and small cauldrons that were balanced precariously close to the edges of tables.

The flooring had to be ancient. It protested his every step, squeaking and groaning like a cat in heat.

One step later, a floorboard sank under his weight. A sharp *crack* rang through the room, and when he glanced down he saw a thin line split through the wood, as if he were standing on thin ice.

Max froze. “Something tells me I should wait by the door.”

Arthur J. Kind sat at a table in the middle of the room, surrounded by stacks of books, bundles of herbs tied with twine, an assortment of laboratory glassware too complicated to name, and test tubes containing iridescent liquids.

“Nonsense, Maximus,” Arthur said without looking up. With a wrinkled hand, he gestured to Dominic, who was the first to make it to Art’s table, followed closely by Blue, who was staring wide-eyed at the many things to see in Witchlight Alchemy and Archives. Dallas was taking her time; she’d got out of school early and demanded to come with, eager to see Arthur’s new place of work after all that garbage had gone down at Lucent Enterprises. Art went on, “If this winged gentleman can make it across the room without falling through the floors or blowing up the building, so can you.”

“Did you hear that, Max?” Dominic looked over his shoulder with a smirk. “He called me a winged gentleman.” When Max scowled, Dominic turned back around, shoulders shaking with laughter. “Max wishes he was as graceful and light-footed as me.”

“When did you start working here, Arthur?” Dallas asked. She leaned over one of the tables that were pressed up against the left wall and tapped the side of a condenser, long red nail clinking against the glass. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the grimy window behind the table, turning her hair molten copper.

Max couldn’t help but notice the way her back curved, her round ass rising up in the dusty air. Her breasts dipped low, threatening to knock over a collection of glassware. She was still in her school uniform, an outfit he’d been meaning to fuck her in for a while now.

He looked away before his dick could get hard.

"Ah, what day is it again?" the old man mumbled, mostly asking himself than anyone else. "Monday, it was. Monday was my first day."

"Do you like it here?" Dallas kept walking through the room, gazing up at the oil paintings covering every inch of the walls.

Max started trailing behind her again, flinching every time a floorboard squeaked or popped. Was he really that heavy?

"I'd say it's the perfect place for me to spend some time before I officially retire," Arthur said. "Look at me—I can barely take my eyes off my task to entertain you lot." He finished off whatever he was doing and closed the book that was open on the table in front of him, pages snapping together with a cloud of dust. He folded his hands on the cover. "Now then, what brings you here?"

"We have a new friend," Max said. He'd managed to catch up with them without falling through the floor, their group now huddled around one end of Arthur's table. "Her name's Blue."

"Blue?" Arthur looked her over, glasses sliding down his nose. She shrunk under the attention, angling her willowy body so that half of her was hidden by the Angel of Death looming like a deadly shadow at her side. "Did the name or the hair come first?"

"We don't really know," Dominic began. The girl looked up at him, appearing lost. Dominic kept his eyes on her when he spoke, and Max didn't miss how the Angel draped a comforting wing across her shoulders. "Max, Lace, and Tanner found her by the river last night. She only speaks Ilevyn, so we haven't been able to find out much about her except her name."

Dallas elbowed the Angel in the abs. "Dom insists that he knows how to speak Ilevyn, but the only thing he could translate is that she was with a group of people looking for a colored bird." She snorted. "Think it was a macaw or a parakeet?"

Max couldn't help it; he wheezed a laugh that pushed Dallas over the edge. She started snorting, eyes watering.

Dominic glowered. "When Arthur proves me right, you're all going to feel pretty stupid for mocking me."

"Alright, joke's over," Max said around a grin. His cheeks were aching. "We're just teasing, man." But Arthur was trying not to laugh too, and seeing the usually serious man struggling to contain his amusement nearly had Max in stitches again. He had to look up at the cobwebs hanging from the vaulted ceiling to find his next words. "Got any books in here that might help us?"

Arthur managed to regain composure. "I think if there's anywhere in this city that has books about Ilevyn, it'll be on these shelves." He rose to his feet and padded to the back of the long room. "Come with me. This might take a while, and we really should settle this argument once and for all: macaw or parakeet?"

"I hate all of you," Dominic grumbled. But he took off after Arthur, Blue right on his heels.

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"Why'd you ask to come with if you're just going to be texting the whole time?" Max asked Dallas.

He knew he was being a grouch, but he couldn't help it; he was due for some shuteye. Ever since Kalendae, he'd had trouble sleeping, and he knew he wasn't the only one. But while each of his family members had struggles that came and went, Darien's were persistent enough that Max often debated suggesting he seek help. He was up all hours of the night, every night; he had it worse than any of them.

The others were seated at a table, studying the handful of books Arthur had plucked off the dirty shelves. They'd gotten nowhere so far, but none of them had expected this to be easy.

Dallas gasped, but she didn't look up from her screen. "Are you jealous, Reacher?"

"No." But she hadn't stopped grinning at her phone, hadn't stopped clicking buttons. He never thought he'd be the jealous type, but his feelings for the witch were starting to get out of control, his imagination with them. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just a friend," Dallas said in a singsong voice as she slid her phone into her bag. Finally.

"If you're done, get over here and be helpful." He inclined his head toward the table.

"Excuse me?" *Uh-oh.* Dal's voice echoed sharply, earning a collective shush from the others and a curious look from Blue, who probably wondered why the crazy redhead was being so loud. Lacey had given Blue some of her old clothes, and gauze now covered her arm where she'd cut out the tracking device last night. Now that her hair was dry and brushed, and the dirt was scrubbed off her skin, she looked less like a drowned cat and more like a normal, everyday girl. Well, aside from the hair. Dallas waved an exasperated hand at him. "How are *you* helping?" she demanded.

Max bristled. "I'm standing guard."

"Oh, *very* helpful, Max." She worked at keeping her voice down. "We definitely need protection from all these dangerous books and bottles. Wouldn't want to die of paper cuts, would we?"

"Actually," Dominic murmured, distracted by the book in front of him as he turned a page that crackled from age and dust, "I wouldn't be so confident that some of the things in here won't explode."

Blue was watching Dallas, head cocked to one side like a bird. She pushed herself up from the table and took a step toward the witch,

white sneakers inaudible on the old floors. She had a habit of walking heel to toe, as if afraid of being heard. Max still couldn't get over all the blue. It was...weird. Really freaking weird.

"What is it?" Dallas demanded, looking ready to bolt. "What's wrong?" Her eyes flicked helplessly to Max.

He shrugged, feeling as amused as he probably looked.

Slowly, Blue reached up and plucked a cobweb out of Dal's hair.

A squeal tore out of Dallas. It rattled the beakers and nearly gave poor Arthur a heart attack.

Even though Max had seen it coming, the high-pitched sound still raised goosebumps on his skin. "Damn it all to hell, Red," he complained, shaking his shoulders to get rid of the chill.

Dallas was bouncing in place, her thumping feet causing glass to rattle and books to knock together on shelves. "Ewwwww! Get it, get it! Get it out, get it out!"

Blue calmly let the cobweb drift to the floor. She studied Dallas's hair and tilted her head to the side, looking very much like a bird again with her peculiar, wide-eyed expression. "Scarlet," she mused.

"Hey, she knows a word!" Dallas waved emphatically at Blue.

Max stuck a finger in his ear, rubbing away the ache from all the noise. "I'm standing right here, Dal," he mumbled. He was addressing Blue when he said, "I just call her Red sometimes, but her name's Dallas. Dallas Loud-as-Hell Bright."

Blue gave him a blank look. And then she lifted a hand and pointed at Dallas—not at her hair, but at her chest. "Scarlet," she said again, shaking her finger at her. "Inferno." She spoke the words carefully, appearing desperate for them to understand. "*Scarlet.*"

Dallas's brow furrowed, her lower lip jutting out in thought. She looked between Max, Dominic, and Arthur. "Dallas," the witch corrected, jabbing her own chest with her index finger.

There was a beat of silence. Max looked Dominic's way in search of an explanation, but the Angel threw his hands in the air, his expression as befuddled as Arthur's.

"Dallas," Blue repeated with a nod. She looked...disappointed.

*Odd*, Max thought.

The rusted bells hanging above the door to Witchlight chimed. Max reached for his gun as everyone turned to see who was entering, but he quickly abandoned the movement when he recognized the raven-haired girl and the brawny werewolf on her heels.

"Are you for real?" Max growled.

Sabrina, dressed in her AA uniform, skipped toward them with a grin on her face. Behind her was Logan Sands, looking like he'd got dragged out of bed minutes ago. The yawn that was stretching his mouth so wide you could see all his teeth was proof of that.

“Is *that* who you were texting?” Max said to Dallas, pointing at the half-witch, half-werewolf who looked way too happy to be here. Now, he had *more* people to babysit. Darien was adamant about keeping Blue’s presence on the downlow, but Dallas evidently didn’t care about that. She’d pissed Darien off so many times since they’d met, it was a miracle he hadn’t barred her from entering Hell’s Gate.

Beaming, Dallas put an arm around Sabrina’s shoulders. They rested their heads together in a look-how-cute-we-are gesture. “Told you I was texting a friend,” Dallas said.

“I asked you not to tell anyone what we’re doing.”

“Sabrine doesn’t fit into the whole *anyone* category, Max. You should know that by now.” And Dallas never listened to anyone, but apparently, he hadn’t figured that out either.

“I want to help,” Sabrina said, lifting her chin. “Besides, I’m good at stuff like this.”

“She is,” Dallas agreed, nodding emphatically.

Max rolled his eyes. “Whatever. But no more helpers. Got it?”

“Got it,” they both said at the same time, their voices mingling.

They got to work on translating again. Logan wasn’t good with this type of work either, so he and Max stood nearby, watching as the others flipped pages and scribbled on notepads.

Max was wrapped up in a conversation with Logan about the House of the Blood Rose when Dallas spoke, addressing the group.

“Guys,” she said.

“Emilie hasn’t contacted Chrysanthia since Kalendae,” Logan was saying. “Chrys keeps wanting to check up on her at the Blood Rose, but a wolf can’t exactly walk up to the front door—”

Dallas shouted, “*Guys!*”

She had everyone’s attention then. They turned to face her, dropping the conversations they were having, pens freezing on paper.

“We might have a problem.” She clicked something on her phone screen, and then flipped the device around so they could see.

There was a photograph of a girl’s face on it. Her shoulder-length hair was light blue, her eyes electric teal. She was staring at the camera without smiling, her gaze shooting hatred through the screen.

“Is this you?” she asked Blue.

It was. She was a wanted criminal, her mugshot posted all over websites worldwide.

What made it worse, she had a price on her head. A big one.

Being inside the Devil's Advocate brought back a slew of memories. While some of those memories—the much more recent ones—were a wet dream come true, most of the others were...not so great. And that was putting it lightly.

It was too early in the day for the place to be packed to full capacity, but that didn't make it any more inviting. There was more air to breathe, sure, but the reality remained: this place was a cesspool. An ugly building in dire need of bulldozing. But Darien had plans for this cesspool. Plans that didn't involve a bulldozer.

At least, not yet.

"Think Baylor's expecting us?" Ivy chirped as they made their way down the staircase that led to the mist-covered dance floor. She held onto the railing, fingers melting through the frost coating the surface.

"He's probably been having nightmares of me turning up for days now," Darien laughed. Baylor would've been one of the first to hear of Randal's death. By now, it had to be spreading like wildfire that would soon reach the ears of every Darkslayer house in the city, if it hadn't already. After what he planned to do here today, the chances of that information reaching them would skyrocket.

Darien didn't allow himself to think about that. That was a problem for another day. Not to mention the fact that no one knew exactly how the crime lord and his group of miscreants had died.

Again, a problem for another day, hopefully one that wouldn't arrive for a long time. If word got out that Darien had led them all into a death trap, at least *one* of Randal's remaining men would come after him.

Which meant he would need to shed more blood. The answer was always more blood, an endless cycle of violence that was impossible to break away from.

Ivy said, "How do you think he's going to react?"

"Like a fucking cry baby. Probably throw a temper tantrum and embarrass his minions so badly, they'll be glad to get rid of him." He'd pay good money to see that.

Ivy grinned up at him with a smile identical to his own. "You think?"

"Only one way to find out."

Darien found his favorite bouncer by the bar. The heavyset warlock with the booming laugh didn't need much convincing to bring him

and his sister up to Baylor's office. While the vampire did his shady dealings on the bottom floor, behind the spell-protected door Loren had managed to slip through the last time they were here, Baylor's office was higher up, tucked away down a narrow corridor near the colossal statue of Tempus and Ignis going at it like a couple of horny rabbits.

It was the ugliest statue he'd ever seen, bad enough to make him want to stab his eyes out. It would've been the first thing to go, had he planned on spending more time here. But those days were behind him now, and he didn't miss them. This place would be nothing but his newest cash cow, an extra form of income until he'd had enough of milking it.

At the end of the hallway was a single red door partially hidden behind a thick velvet curtain. A sign on its worn surface said EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Darien didn't knock. He opened the door and walked inside, Ivy and the bouncer—Whalen—on his heels.

The white-haired Baylor and his cronies were seated around a long table in the centre of the room. They were laughing over a joke that quickly became unfunny as they took in the people who'd barged in.

Baylor was the first to speak, the question he voiced as frosty as the air in the room. "What the hell are you doing here?" If looks could kill, Darien would be bleeding out on the ground. Too bad for Baylor, it didn't work that way, and Darien knew the guy was too much of a coward to take so much as one swing at him.

"I've come to check out my latest financial investment," Darien replied.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Baylor's voice was a shout.

"You're in my chair."

He puffed out a laugh that hung in a cloud before him. The air in here reeked of vampires—a floral stench that burned the throat. Baylor looked to the men at either side of him for approval or intervention, Darien wasn't sure which. It didn't look like Baylor knew either. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said you're in my chair. Get up and quit being rude."

Baylor stayed put. "What are you playing at, kid? You can't just march in here and expect the owner of this place to get up and leave at your command."

"Actually, I'm the owner."

Chairs creaked as the men at the table shifted, glancing at each other. Baylor's jaw visibly hardened, eyes turning cold as glass. The look on his face told Darien he hadn't been far off when he'd joked about the vampire having nightmares about this moment.

Darien said, "I'm sure you've heard of my father's untimely death."

"I've heard rumors—"

"It's not my fault if you chose to ignore them. My father is dead, and I don't think I need to tell you who's first in line to inherit his possessions, including this club you've done a lousy job of running."

"Are you firing me?" he scoffed.

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"You can't do that."

"Can't I? I *am* the owner. Says so on the will."

"I'd like to take a look at that."

"I bet you would. Get up. Gather your things. Leave. We're done here. Take Grease-fingers and Ass-wipe with you. They're fired too." He gestured to the two morons sitting closest to him.

Grease-fingers threw his hands in the air. "The fuck for?"

"For running your mouth behind my back and for groping your dancers, that's why." He turned to Ass-wipe. "Would you like to hear your reasons?"

The werewolf pushed out from the table and stood. "I'm good."

"At least one of you is smart. The rest of you can stay if you're willing to adapt to some changes around here."

The others nodded their agreements, dropping their former boss as if he'd transformed into literal shit right before their eyes.

Baylor looked at Grease-fingers and Ass-wipe, but they were already halfway out the door. "*Well?*" he yelled at the remainder of his men. "Do something, you useless idiots!"

Ivy stepped forward, heels clicking on the floor. "Oh yes," she crooned. "Please do. We're dying for a good tussle." She rubbed her hands together, eyes glinting with wicked promise.

No one at the table moved. No one met Baylor's desperate gaze. No one even breathed too loudly.

But then a shadow was moving at Darien's left.

He stayed still, a smile playing on his mouth, as he handed this one to Ivy, who was moving before anyone could blink.

A blade glinted in the corner of Darien's vision, but Ivy stopped it with a hand to the wrist of a man twice her size. With one quick movement, she had the knife in her grip. The man shouted out in pain as she drove her knee up into his groin.

Just as he was doubling over, hands flying to his crotch, Ivy drove the blade through his ear.

The man and the blade fell in unison, the thud of a lifeless body striking the floor blending in with the metallic clatter of the knife landing in a pool of red.

Darien grinned at the speechless men seated around the table. "She's amazing, isn't she?"

Silence fell again as Ivy resumed her place at Darien's side. She



tucked her hair behind an ear and fixed her jacket, as if preparing for a speech.

Baylor was at a loss as to what to do. He stared at his men in anger, but none of them moved. "You're all a bunch of pussies, aren't you?"

The vampire didn't get a reply.

He pushed out from the table, knocking over his chair with a loud *bang*. "I'll remember this, you pieces of shit." He stormed past Darien, close enough to breathe on him but not close enough to touch. His brains weren't total mush, then.

"Good, that went smoothly," Darien drawled. It was to Whalen that he said quietly, "Keep an eye on him. Make sure he doesn't take anything he shouldn't." The bouncer left promptly. Darien called over his shoulder, "See you around, Baylor."

The vampire's voice echoed down the hallway. "Fuck you!"

Darien snickered. He started barking out orders at the last of the men, putting his least hated of his father's employees in charge of the place for the next little while. Business would continue as usual until they found some new hires and put some new rules in place, mainly ones that focused on the dealings that went on in the back rooms, along with the blurred lines regarding what the men in this establishment were allowed to do to their female coworkers.

When he was finished, he and Ivy headed down to the bar for a drink—and to make sure Baylor, Grease-fingers, and Ass-wipe were off the premises.

They were. That hadn't taken much.

The place was filling up as the afternoon inched toward evening, the regulars eager to begin their traditions. People arrived in droves, and dancers headed to their perches in sequined outfits and heels that had to be at least ten inches tall.

Darien was throwing back his second shot of tequila when he felt a small hand glide across his upper back, the touch featherlight. He set down his glass and turned around to find a raven-haired hellseher standing before him.

Her hand slid down to his forearm, but she didn't remove it as she smiled up at him, tossing the hair out of her face. Her full lips were painted the deep shade of rubies, the colorful strobe lights that pulsed to the tune of the music dancing across her smooth porcelain skin. She wore a red satin dress with a low neckline, a slit in each side exposing the long sweep of her legs.

"Can I have a word?" The question was wrapped in honey, her large eyes beseeching.

Darien stepped away from her touch and bumped into a stool at the bar. He stared at her like she was a ghost who'd crawled out of a

grave specifically to haunt him. It sure felt like it.

Her hand fell to her side, the smile on her lips fading until not a hint of it was left. "Relax," she said in that husky bedroom-voice she always used, regardless of whether she was ordering food or about to suck dick. "I'm not here to try to jump your bones or anything."

"You better not be," Ivy cut in, stepping up to his side, two overflowing shot glasses in hand. Darien gave his sister a grateful look, because for some dumb reason, his tongue wouldn't move. "The man's in love, and I'm not about to stand by while you try to screw that up for him. Got it?"

Christa Copenspire gave Ivyana a tight smile, the light in her eyes fading. "Yeah, I got the memo, Ivy. Thanks." When her dark eyes flicked to Darien's, he couldn't help but bristle under the attention. There was a time when he would've gladly drowned himself in the way she was looking at him, but now it only made him want to get out of here—and quickly. "About that word."

He didn't know what this woman wanted, but something told him it couldn't be good. Christa had a tendency to walk into his life whenever there was a problem she wanted him to deal with. Another of the many red flags he'd missed while fooling around with her. While he'd thought he was getting what he wanted out of the relationship—a hard fuck with no strings attached—she'd got a lot more from him than he had intended to give her. And that usually involved his fists and some guy's face as he cleaned up the messes she left behind, most of those messes centring around drooling men who couldn't take a hint.

Darien gave Ivy a single nod, and she departed with a stern look in Christa's direction.

"Your sister sure is frightening when she wants to be."

Darien braced his feet apart and crossed his arms. "Make it quick."

She took in his body language, gaze snagging on his hands. She could've been thinking about a million things in that second, and he didn't want to know what any of them were. "I thought you might want some insider information about the Wargs," she began.

Darien smirked. "What are you, a snitch now?"

"I work for Channary." Not surprising. As if to prove it to him, she lifted her hair, showing off the crescent moon glowing below her right ear. "After Randal's death, and after completely uprooting my life in Skylen and not exactly wanting to start all over again, I needed to consider my options. And although she helps me pay my bills now, I look out for the people I care about." Darien didn't miss the implication behind her words, or the way her eyes roamed his features, as if she'd longed to look at him again for some time now.

"If this is another trick, Christa, so help me—"

“No tricks, Darien. I learned my lesson, believe me.” She drew a deep breath, chest rising. “Look, I don’t know what your plans are from here on out, but neither does anyone else. And if you have any intention of claiming Randal’s title, I would do it soon. Lionel isn’t the only one who has his eyes on the prize, and...he might be the least of your worries.”

Darien frowned. “Channary?”

“Let’s just say Channary is very interested in reaping the benefits that would come with having a seat at the top, and I wouldn’t put it past her to ally with Lionel to see what that power tastes like. The longer you sit on this, the harder it will be for you to win that seat if you let it slip through your fingers.”

“Who says I want it?”

“I’m just *suggesting*,” she enunciated the word, “that if you have any intention of inheriting what’s rightfully yours, I would do it soon. If Lionel or Channary end up in charge, you know they will destroy the whole pyramid, starting with you.” Her eyes flicked over his shoulder. “You and your family.”

Destroy was a kind way to put it. Channary and Lionel wouldn’t just want Darien and his Devils to leave town—they would want them dead. And they would use Darien’s reluctance to assert his claim over the Darkslaying throne against him, gathering enough allies of their own that no one would challenge them.

“I appreciate the concern, but I can handle this.”

“I have no doubts that you can. I just think you need to make your decision quickly. Wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt.” Something about the way she said it made him believe she was talking about Loren, but she was smart enough to keep his girl’s name out of her mouth.

“If you’re done, I’ve got places to be.”

Darien sensed her aura dimming with disappointment. It told him enough about the memories she was playing in her head, the ones that involved the two of them leaving a place together instead of separately, so they could breathe each other’s air until dawn.

“See you around,” she crooned with a flutter of her fingertips.

Not likely. “Later.” He watched her disappear into the crowd, meeting up with a couple female friends he didn’t recognize, neither of them Darkslayers. She didn’t look his way again.

Ivy was back within the minute, more shots in hand, two in her right and one in her left. “So?”

“She brought a few warnings,” Darien replied. “Mainly ones involving Channary and Lionel.”

“Plotting their takeover of the world?”

“Something like that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

"I'm not. Let's go. I've gotta bag a demon within the hour." And make it home in time to take Loren to Erasmus's house for dinner.

Ivy offered him a shot and downed the other two like a champ, one right after the other. Darien threw his back too, liquid burning his chest, and set down the glass. Before they left, Ivy reached across the bar to pluck a lemon wedge from a silver bowl. She sucked on it without a grimace, and then tossed it into the nearest trashcan as they made their way across the dance floor, mist swirling around their legs.

"Breed?" she asked.

"Hound."

Her head turned his way in a flash. "No way."

"Don't worry. I'm burning up inside, so it's the perfect challenge."

He had a feeling someone was watching him, and he had a pretty solid idea who it was. But he didn't turn. The last thing he needed was for Christa to think he was looking at her for the wrong reasons.

They were halfway up the stairs when a dark blur lunged at him from the corner of his eye. A blur with a skull-like head, double rows of serrated teeth, and nothing but slits for a nose.

Darien drew in a strangled breath as he lost his footing on the step, nearly falling backward. His hand fumbled for a weapon, but it wouldn't cooperate. Gravity sucked him into its grip.

Ivy grabbed hold of his arm, catching him right on time. "Darien," she tried, her voice echoing. She steadied him on the step, angling herself so she was facing him, both of her hands gripping his arm now. "Darien! *Shit.*" He was still teetering backward.

He was breathing so heavily, every inhalation was a gasp. It was so hot in here, he was sweating, and that thing...the creature—

"Darien," Ivy said again, pulling him steady. He was able to focus on her face this time, able to slow his breathing. "Are you okay?"

He tried to swallow, but his throat was suddenly parched. "I thought I saw something." He looked at the wall, where he'd seen the dark shadow emerge, as if it were peeling itself free from the cement. He gestured with a hand that felt as unreliable as his mind. Gods, he was fucking shaking. What the hell. "There."

Ivy followed his stare, but he could tell from the worried look on her face that she was seeing what he was now seeing—what he should've been seeing all along.

There was nothing there but a wall. No skull, no teeth, no pit-like eyes. Nothing but cement.

"Are you feeling okay?" Ivy hissed.

It was by instinct that he looked down at the bar. Had someone slipped something into his drink?

Ivy voiced his name again, calling him back to attention, hand outstretched toward him.

"I'm fine." He smoothed his hair back and adjusted his shirt. Sweat prickled on his back and brow. "Let's get out of here." He hurried up the stairs, resisting the urge to look back, Ivy right beside him.

They were nearing the club doors when three men, all of them hellsehers, stepped in their path.

Darien stopped, hand hovering near Ivy, ready to pull her behind him at the first sign of danger.

"Darien," said the one in the middle. A big guy who looked like he was married to the gym. He had cold eyes, a square chin, and coarse flaxen hair cut into a flat top, the style making his already boxy head look boxier. "Got a minute?"

"No." He didn't like the looks of these guys; they were the kind of company his father would've kept.

The man smirked at his companions and straightened the lapels on his gray suit jacket. "My name is Gaven Payne." He must've seen the look on Darien's face, because he smirked again. "Now do you got a minute?"

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In a small private room near the front doors of the club, Darien sat at a table across from Gaven Payne and his men. Ivy was seated at his right, her back ramrod straight. They'd both hoped for longer than a few weeks before Randal's men came sniffing them out, but that was too much to ask for, it seemed.

Darien was the first to initiate conversation; he was tired of sitting in silence, tired of being gawked at and assessed, like a piece of meat. He kept his tone civil and low—something he knew his temper wouldn't allow for long. "What can I help you with?"

"Business," Gaven replied.

"That's really fucking vague. Are you here to buy the club?"

"Actually, we're here to buy you."

"What is that supposed to mean? I don't hook."

"Shut up and let me explain, smartass."

Just like that, Darien's attempts at keeping this exchange civil went out the window. Now, he was seeing red. If this prick dared to speak to him like that again, this conversation would be over so fast, no one would see it coming. "Get on with it then and quit wasting my valuable time."

"I take it you know who we are?"

"Gaven Payne-in-My-Fucking-Ass and cohorts. That's all the introduction I need."

Gaven gave a humorless laugh and sat forward, interlocking his fingers on the table. "Your father and I were business partners. I

brought in the merchandise from overseas, he handled the clients. We had a good thing going, he and I. The whole operation was effortless, just the way I like it. He made me a promise that if anything ever happened to him, he had plans in place to keep our operation running. It didn't matter if he was behind bars, bleeding out, or already dead, he had it figured out. His word was part of our agreement."

"And what word was that?"

"That his son, Darien Cassel, would assume all responsibilities in his absence." Darien had seen this coming, especially after his visit with Finn yesterday, but it still left him unable to breathe for a minute.

"Why me? Why not one of your own trusted men? You pick someone, I stay out of your way. How's that?"

"We need someone who doesn't just know the streets and the clients, but also someone who can handle them. Randal wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty or to have his face in the spotlight. Us? We prefer to operate from the shadows, keep our names and faces relatively unknown. You and whoever you choose to assist you would be the names and faces taking over for Randal and his men. We would compensate you for your time, of course. Just like we did Randal."

Finn was right. He had a lot to worry about and very little chance of getting out of it, at least not unscathed.

But he still told them, "Find someone else."

"Like I said." Gaven smiled coldly. "Your father reassured us that you would take over for him if anything happened—anything at all that would render him unable to fulfill his end of our agreement, he had it figured out."

"How kind of him to leave me such a glorious inheritance. I would thank him if he wasn't dead."

"If you're finished running your mouth, perhaps you would like to make a deal. I took reassurance in Randal's promise, and I am unwilling to accept the breaking of such a deal, especially by a lippy child who doesn't know when to shut the fuck up."

Darien's blood boiled. A Surge was knocking, begging to let the monster inside him out to play. His rage was a living thing—expanding, expanding, expanding until it filled the room, a great monster with bared teeth and raised hackles. Gaven Payne was a dead man walking.

"I only see one lippy child here, and that's you," Darien said, his voice glacial. "And I am far from done. You've got your head up your ass if you believe I'd be willing to work with the likes of you."

"How can I say this in a way that will sink in?" There was a cruel curve to his lips and a wicked glint in his eyes that suggested he was enjoying this more than he should. "Darien, if you don't cooperate, we

will kill you. Do you understand me, or do I need to speak slower?"

Darien's fingers curled into the armrests of his chair.

Gaven continued, "We will kill your sister, your dark-haired side-piece downstairs, your other Devils. We will kill your woman—"

Darien lunged forward in his seat. Ivy grabbed onto his arm, holding him back as he spat, "*Fuck. You.*"

Gaven's men snickered.

He knew the moment he did it that he shouldn't have reacted that way. He'd betrayed his greatest weakness, and these men had done nothing to earn that information except dangle a few taunting words in front of him.

He was out of practice—and he'd had too many sleepless nights.

Gaven gave him a cold smile. "She attends Angelthene Academy, correct? Works at a little apothecary on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star?"

The room was spinning. Darien's chest heaved, and he felt his throat and lungs constrict.

Gaven continued, "And what about that house you love so much? 775237 Victoria Amazonica District. Beautiful red-brick house with jasmine in the yard. Your rooms face the back. Oh wait, I'm sorry, let me correct that: you and your *girl's* rooms face the back. Loren Calla—sweet little blonde thing. Human. Wouldn't hurt a fly, right?" Gaven sneered, his hateful gaze clawing its way from Darien's head to his boots. "How'd she end up with someone like you?"

The room spun faster. All the blood in Darien's face rushed down to his feet, and he thought he might throw up.

Gaven rose, the movement fluid, and straightened his suit jacket—wrinkle- and stain-free. "Think it over. Like I said: you don't need to work with us. But it would be in your best interest if you did."

For the first time in his life, Darien couldn't think of anything to say.

Gaven's men made their way to the door, while Gaven himself lingered, still watching Darien and Ivy as he pushed his chair in under the table. His hands were barely scarred, not one callous on his palms. Pussy fucking hands.

Gaven said, "It's so nice to meet you, Darien. Ivy." He dipped his chin in Ivy's direction. "You know...face to face." The subtle threat hung in the air between them, sending the room spiralling like a tornado.

Darien and Ivy knew their faces now, a fact that gave Gaven and his cronies more incentive to kill them if they didn't cooperate. The men who worked from the shadows had stepped out to bait them, and Darien hated himself for not seeing it coming.

Gaven and his men left without another word or a glance back,

heading down to the bar for a drink.

Darien said nothing, and neither did Ivy. They stood in silence and crossed the room.

He was nearing the door when he couldn't take it anymore. With a shout of anger, he threw a chair into a wall, smashing it into pieces. Splintered wood showered the room. His sister was moving so quickly, he could barely keep up with her.

People wisely stepped out of their way as they wove through the club. Darien didn't trust himself right now, and some innocent bystander might get their neck snapped before he even realized what he was doing.

They had just left the doors of the Devil's Advocate and were in the crisp air of the late afternoon when Ivyana spun around to face him. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were bolted wide with fear.

"Take them down," she gritted out, throat bobbing. "I want you to take them *all* down."

He tried to find the words that would ease her worries, but he came up empty. Because he was just as worried as she was.

Those assholes had found out where they lived, where Loren worked, what school she went to, where they fucking slept. He wouldn't put it past them to have gathered more information than that, and if he didn't agree to work with them, if he didn't cooperate...

There was strength in numbers, but he and his Devils weren't always together. They took jobs alone, just like the one Darien would be heading to as soon as he dropped Ivy off at home. As long as Randal's business partners were around, none of them were safe. And he couldn't simply walk back into the club and kill them; Gaven had a lot of ties, not just in this city, but beyond as well, stretching into the surrounding states and across the ocean. If the prick suddenly turned up dead, it wouldn't take his men long to figure out who'd done it and retaliate.

Which meant Darien would have to do more than just kill Gaven. He would have to get rid of all of them—and crumble the entire operation they'd put in place.

"I'll take care of this," he told Ivy. She was pacing the sidewalk, heart beating fast, fingertips pressing the pulse in her temples.

He hated seeing her like this. It brought back memories of their childhood, back when he'd done his best to shield her from their father's wicked ways but didn't always succeed. There was a lot of screaming back then, a lot of crying, a lot of talk of running away. Sometimes, he still wondered where they would've ended up if they had done it—if they'd found the courage to leave the cage that was disguised as a home.



“Ivy, I will. Look.” He already had his phone in hand. He dialed Finn, and the detective picked up on the second ring.

“Solace,” he said in greeting.

Ivy stopped pacing. She folded her arms across her chest and watched the sidewalk in silence, the skin on her neck raised to gooseflesh. It took a lot to rattle Ivy, and most of the time what succeeded at rattling her was anything that had to do with Randal. They’d managed to keep the location of Hell’s Gate a secret for years, and now that it was exposed...

“I’ll do it,” Darien said. “I’ll call you as soon as I have something worth reporting.”

There was a pause and a crackle on the other end that sounded like papers being rustled. “Something happen?”

“Let’s just say you’d better have a solid plan in place and a whole lot of firepower.”

A pause. And then: “That’s what you’re for.”

Darien laughed, but there was nothing funny about this. He wasn’t going to get any help, was he? Not that he’d expected it, especially not from law enforcement. After all, that was why *Finn* had come to *him*.

But he had a plan. A crazy plan that might not work, but he was willing to risk it. Finn had mentioned a few things the day they’d talked in his office that might not be such a bad idea after all.

“You fuck with me, I will kill you,” Darien warned. He hung up.

He *would* take care of it. As the leader of the Seven Devils, it was what he did best.

Cleaning the shit off the streets and taking care of his family. Even if it killed him.

## PART II

### THE CHALK DOOR

## 12

By the time Darien got back to Hell's Gate, he was exhausted. His whole body ached, and nearly every part of him was colored with bruises and cuts, a few of those cuts deep enough to leave scars.

The collection he'd been hired for was a vicious breed of demon known as a Hound, a creature that looked nothing like its name. He'd tracked it down in Angelthene National Forest, where it had taken up residency near the waterfalls that brought in thousands of tourists every year—and those tourists brought in thousands of precious gold mynet to spend at the many businesses and attractions throughout the city. Which was why he hadn't been the least bit surprised when the mayor had asked if he would take care of the demon, though he didn't exactly jump with joy when presented with the offer.

This was only the second Hound he'd killed in his lifetime, and after today's events, and what'd happened at Whitebridge, he preferred to keep it that way. It was one of the hardest creatures to kill, mostly because of its sheer size and strength. Not to mention the poisonous barbs on its tail. He'd been paid handsomely for the job, but it was creatures like these that made him question if the money was worth the fuss, not to mention the damage to his body. He never used to give a shit about that, had even went out looking for it, but now...

Now, he didn't need pain to feel alive. He had a new addiction—one with a gorgeous smile and hair like sunlight. And while he still needed violence to curb his inner demons and smother his Surges, it didn't hold the same appeal as before, and whenever he found that he could go without it, he did, always choosing her. He would always choose her.

Darien strode into the house, not bothering to remove his boots and barely managing to get his keys into the wooden bowl in the entrance hall as he passed the glass table.

Travis was sitting at the island in the kitchen, typing out a message on his phone with one hand, the other grasping a beer. The can was so cold, it was dripping condensation onto the counter. The sight of it made Darien's mouth water.

“Got anymore of those?”

“I just bought a case,” Travis replied flatly, not looking up from his phone. “Help yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Darien breathed. He swung open the fridge door and bent over, wincing as the muscles in his back tensed up. All these demons he’d been dealing with lately made him genuinely miss hunting down criminals. They were far easier to bag—and far more entertaining, especially when they groveled on the floor in fear.

The cans rolled and clanked together in the case as he retrieved one, his rings and watch tearing the cardboard. He swung the fridge door shut harder than he’d meant to, causing the appliance to quake.

A low snarl slipped from the shadows behind the cereal boxes.

“Sorry, Morty,” Darien chuckled. No sooner had he started laughing that it turned into a sharp hiss, a new wave of pain blooming through his back. With a shake of his head, he muttered, “I need to retire.”

He cracked open the beer and rifled through the contents of the cabinet next to the fridge until he found a bottle of painkillers. He took two with a swig of his drink and then joined Travis at the island. His cousin was still preoccupied with his phone, probably texting some girl he’d met at a bar, like usual. Travis was a zero-commitment kind of guy who never brought the same girl home twice.

Darien was still trying to gather his thoughts after what’d happened at the Devil’s Advocate. He would have to tell the others as soon as he found the words, but judging from how the voting had swung last night, he knew none of them would object to this turn of events. Except, of course, the whole issue involving Gaven and his men having found out where they lived.

Another day. Another fucking day for that problem. At this rate, he would have to buy a planner and start penciling in all this shit that was going on. *Saturday, nine p.m.: Feed Gaven Payne-in-My-Fucking-Ass and cohorts to the monster in Blackgate Manor.*

Yeah, a planner might be a good idea. The Blackgate monster, too—that might be a good idea as well, considering how well that spur-of-the-moment decision had gone last time.

Darien made to sit on one of the barstools, but pain that felt like a bolt of electricity ran up the back of his leg and into his spine, making him freeze before it could get any worse.

Travis finally looked up from his phone. “You hurt?”

Darien forced his features into neutrality and made due with leaning on the counter. “Too much Darkslaying lately.”

Travis pulled the barstool out beside him. “Take a seat.”

“I’ll stand. In case you didn’t notice, that stool almost killed me just now.” He studied Travis, who’d returned to his phone again, features

somber. He was chewing his lip, and his shoulders were so tense they were nearly bunched up to his ears. "You alright?"

Travis gave a half-shrug, eyes still on that screen.

"Trav." No answer. "Did a girl finally manage to get through that thick skin of yours?"

"No." The word was a mumble.

"Then what is it?"

Travis finally dropped his phone to the counter. He put his head in his hands, running his fingers through his hair and then down his face, pulling on his lower eyelids.

And then he crossed his arms on the counter and stared straight ahead. "I need to tell you something."

Dread curled in Darien's stomach. He straightened, his attention drifting to the staircase, his mind whirling with every terrible possibility in the book, every single one of those possibilities involving... "Loren—"

"She's fine," Travis said quickly. He chewed on his lip, still staring straight ahead, looking but clearly not seeing. "But..."

"But what?" That sick feeling in his stomach was back. He squeezed the can of beer so hard, it dented under the pressure with a metallic *crack*. "Trav, so fucking help me—"

"Valary was here." Travis finally looked at him, his mouth set in a firm line. "She was here this morning, and she...she threatened Loren. I got her out, but she..." Travis kept talking, but his words were far away now because Darien stopped hearing them.

Darien didn't know what he was expecting, but it wasn't this. He thought he'd dealt with Valary that night at the Devil's Advocate, but clearly he hadn't done a good enough job of that.

And that fucking Warg had threatened his girl. In the *one* place in all of Angelthene that was supposed to be safe for her.

Darien bared his teeth. "Valary was *here*?" he snapped, interrupting the string of words still coming out of Travis's mouth. He pulverized the beer in his grip, contents splashing the floor. Sharp aluminum cut into his hand, blood sliding through his fingers, but he didn't feel pain. He was seeing red. "In *my* house?"

It was amazing what anger and adrenaline could do to the body. The pain he felt from slaying the Hound evaporated, and he knew it had nothing to do with the drugs.

He was ready to kill.

—

Loren inhaled deeply, feeling her lungs expand as they filled with the fresh, jasmine-scented air of the backyard.

She was out on the balcony again, the doors to Darien's suite wide open behind her. It was easier to think out here, easier to calm her thundering heart every time the images Valary had forced into her mind reappeared with a vengeance.

The Warg had ruined her day. All she'd eaten was a dry, leftover pancake, and aside from venturing downstairs for said pancake, she hadn't left Darien's suite except to come out here.

The fragrance of the jasmine had a calming affect on her body, and so did the fresh air. By focusing on her surroundings, she found that she could soothe her distressed mind and settle her queasy stomach. It was a technique her therapist had taught her back in high school, when she used to go for sessions once a week to deal with the pain of growing up. Taega had stopped paying when she turned eighteen, announcing it was time she grew up and stopped having feelings, as if that were possible. So, she'd had to look for other methods to cope with her anxiety.

That was when she'd found Mordred and Penelope's Mortar and Pestle and discovered the therapeutic affects that certain plants had on the body and mind. And not long after stumbling into the apothecary, she'd discovered her calling.

It was funny how a wrong turn in life sometimes led to the right destination.

Loren drew another deep breath, paying close attention to the cool temperature of the wrought-iron railing under her palms, the balcony beneath her bare feet. The breeze wending through the yard stirred her hair and sent her cherry-print sundress fluttering against her knees.

The sound of boots rapidly striking the floor inside the house pulled her out of her bubble of concentration. She took another deep breath, this time to calm the new bout of nerves racking her body. Knowing Darien was close was a comfort to her, but the speed at which he was walking alerted her to the fact that someone had spilled the beans about the morning's events.

Not *someone*. Travis. She didn't exactly blame him, and a part of her was relieved that Darien had found out, since she no longer had to keep it a secret from him. She was lousy at keeping secrets. But the other part of her felt terrible that he had to be burdened with this. Never mind that she didn't have a clue what to say to him.

But she was out of time to prepare, because Darien's voice was floating through the open doors behind her. "Loren."

Blowing the breath out of her lungs, she slowly turned to face him.

He was standing in the doorway, curtains rustling around him in a breeze, the white lace making a harsh contrast with his long-sleeved gray shirt and black cargo pants. He was scanning her from head to

toe, a mixture of concern and anger on his handsome face.

Two seconds passed. It felt like longer than that, but it was only two before he was moving.

He walked right up to her, his eyes never once leaving hers, and pulled her into a tight embrace. Immediately, the physical contact shut out her worries and made her feel safe. So incredibly safe.

"I'm sorry," he breathed against her neck. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Her throat still ached. She'd done her best to cover up the bruises Valary had left on her skin, but she knew she couldn't keep them a secret from Darien for long—and she knew the makeup would wear off sooner rather than later. "Those things happened before you met me."

He was rocking her from side to side, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other gripping her waist. "But you didn't have to see. You shouldn't ever have to see." His fingers curled in her hair, and his voice became a ragged whisper. "I'm so sorry, Loren. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." Something about his tone seemed off, as if he was apologizing for more than just Valary.

"There's nothing to forgive, okay?" She gripped him tighter, fingers clutching his shirt. "I asked Travis not to tell you—"

"Why would you do that?" He pulled back and took her face into his hands. His broad mouth was set in a frown, and there were shadows in his eyes, but his tone was gentle. "*Why?*"

"I didn't want you to have to know. I didn't want you to worry about me—"

"Lola," Darien sighed, pulling her against his chest again. He held her tight and rocked her gently from side to side, as if they were dancing. The warmth seeping into her body from his was comforting, and she could feel his heart beating under her cheek. "Lola, Lola, Lola... What am I going to do with you?"

She mumbled into his soft shirt, "How much did Travis tell you?"

Darien briefly hesitated before admitting, "Everything."

Loren tensed. "I didn't—"

"It's better that I know, Loren." She didn't like the sound of that, but she didn't want to ask him to explain what he meant.

For a long time, they held each other. Loren matched her breathing to his, listening to his heart beating beneath her ear. With his body flush against hers, it was the only sound that existed. It was more calming than the breeze. More calming than the patter of rain on stormy nights or the sweet scent of jasmine. He was her medicine—her cure.

She only wished she could say the same about herself. It pained her that she used to be his medicine—the cure for his Surges.

The things that used to be always hurt the most.

Darien rubbed her back. "You're tensing up again. Will you tell me what's on your mind?" When she remained quiet, he prodded, his voice exceptionally gentle, "Please?"

"Just..." She breathed deeply. The hollow clack of wooden windchimes drifted up to where they stood. "Just Valary."

Darien's next words made her regret this whole conversation. "I can fix it."

"What do you mean?"

"If you're comfortable with it, I can show you my point of view." She resisted the urge to breathe a sigh of relief; she thought he'd meant something else, like getting involved in a sticky mess they didn't need. "Valary only showed you her own sick thoughts. If you give me the chance, I can prove to you that she means nothing to me, and that you...you're my everything." He pulled back to look at her, but kept his arms around her. "You're my *everything*." The emotion in his words nearly reduced her to tears.

"You don't need to prove anything to me, Darien."

He smoothed her hair back from her face. "You're right. I don't need to, but I want to." The strong column of his throat shifted with a swallow. "Will you let me? I won't do it unless you tell me it's okay."

She was still so rattled by Valary that the most she could do was nod.

Darien said, "I need you to say it."

"Yes," she whispered, nodding again. "Yes, it's okay."

"Hold very still." Gently, Darien cradled her face in his hands and pressed his forehead lightly against hers. "Try to relax. Breathe. Just breathe. I won't do anything you won't like, I promise."

Loren brought her own hands up so they were cupping the backs of his; she could feel the scars flecking his knuckles, a few of them new.

"How does it work?" she whispered, her eyelids sliding shut. She gripped his hands tighter to keep hers from trembling. She wasn't sure why she was so nervous. "Do you need the contact?"

"No," he said, matching her tone. "But you do."

Once the meaning in his words sunk in, her heart gave a painful thump. He knew her better than anyone—better than she knew herself some days. He was right: the physical contact was exactly what she needed as she felt him carefully push at her mind.

Her body must've tightened up, because he abruptly stopped.

"You're okay," he whispered. She felt the mental nudge of his mind against hers again, so different from that night in the dining room, when he'd made her body feel...a certain way. She wasn't sure how it worked—how one type of mental power could feel so different from another.

She worked at yielding to him, loosening her mind the same way



she loosened her taut muscles.

In a volume even quieter than before, Darien said, "You okay?"

She nodded under his hands, and he used his thumbs to draw a calming pattern in her hair. Releasing the breath from her lungs, she forced the last of the tension out of her body, fully letting him in.

Slowly...slowly...and then all at once, he was there in her mind. Wholly there, sharing everything with her.

And he was right; seeing the Warg the way he saw her *did* help how she was feeling. While he didn't show her anything even vaguely sexual, what he did show her was enough. Having him in her mind wasn't as scary as she'd thought it would be. Instead, it felt like he belonged there. He allowed her to feel what he felt, allowed her to see Valary the way he saw her, the truth behind the images and clips and emotions instantly putting her mind and heart at ease. He hadn't loved Valary, hadn't even viewed her as a friend. His relationship with her had been purely physical, and that was all he'd ever wanted from her.

When he released his mental hold on her, she found that her body let go of the last of the tension she was holding. She could breathe a little easier, think a little clearer. Her heart still hurt like someone had ripped it out of her chest and stomped on it, but it was more like a dull ache instead of a searing pain.

Darien was watching her closely, hands still resting on either side of her head. He looked her in the eyes, his own filled with concern that broke her heart more than any jealous girl ever could.

*This* right here—this man was all she cared about. The only thing that mattered.

Darien whispered, "Better?"

Loren nodded. "Better."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his hands sliding down her shoulders, down her arms... They stopped to circle her wrists. Heat bloomed everywhere he touched. His thumb grazed the charm bracelet of the Avenue of the Scarlet Star—the gift he'd given her outside of his mother's restaurant.

"You belong with me." His words were a declaration. A shout out into the universe, a claim that could not be challenged. "No one else. *This*—" He lifted her left hand to his chest, flattening it right above his heart, his strong pulse thumping under her palm. When he spoke, his eyes burned with passion and intent. "*This* is yours. From now until the day I die, and every day after, I am yours. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

He cracked a grin that showed the dimple in his cheek. A grin that washed all her worries away, blush darkening her face.

"You turn all shades of red when you're around me," Darien said,

his fingers playing with the little shops and restaurants on her bracelet. "Did you know that?"

"Only because you're so charming."

That teasing smile faltered. "You think too highly of me, sweetheart."

"You don't think highly enough of yourself."

Every trace of humor in his expression faded, that adorable smile shifting into a frown. "I'm going to fix this."

Loren's heart stumbled, the too-brief moment of peace slipping through her grasp. Her hands tightened around his, fingernails digging into his calloused palms. "Darien, what do you mean *fix this*? I don't want you anywhere near her. And not for the reasons you might think."

"What are you so worried about, baby?"

She stuttered her words. "Earlier, when she was in your dining room—"

"*Our* dining room."

"—*our* dining room, she looked crazed. Like she...like she would've murdered me if Travis hadn't been here."

A muscle feathered in Darien's jaw. "Which is exactly why I need to deal with this."

"No, it is *exactly* why you need to stay away from her."

"She can't hurt me, Loren. Not many people can." He raised her hand to his mouth and planted a kiss on her knuckles. "And I'll never stand by and give anyone the opportunity to hurt *you*." He squeezed her hand lightly before releasing her and walking into their suite. "We need to get ready, or we're going to be late for dinner."

Loren blew out a sigh and dug her nails into her scalp. Her heart was kicking up a storm in her chest, and her stomach felt like it was full of butterflies, but not the good kind.

Darien was right—they were going to be late if they didn't start getting ready.

Another time. She would deal with this Valary situation another time, when she was more equipped to handle it.

“It’s this turn here.” Loren gestured to a road up ahead. It was narrow, the entrance all but engulfed by the dense foliage of pin oaks and jacaranda.

Darien slammed on the brake and cranked the steering wheel to the right. Cars flew by on the freeway, a few of the drivers blaring their horns. Darien gave one guy the middle finger.

“You’d think they would’ve marked it better,” he muttered as he drove down the road that looped through Eternal Light Memorial Gardens. The tires hummed on fresh pavement, and birdsong drifted through the cracked-open sunroof.

Dinner was in forty minutes, so they would need to be quick. Loren knew if she hadn’t set aside the time to come here today, she likely would’ve chickened out. She didn’t know why she was so nervous; the funeral had taken place three days ago, and the grounds were deserted. They both wanted to pay their respects, but without the chance of running into someone who might make a scene. Loren felt guilty for not going to the actual funeral, but the bouquet she held carefully in her lap, along with the visit itself, would hopefully make up for it.

Darien parked on the side of the road that looped through the cemetery and got out. Loren unbuckled her seatbelt and pushed her door open, minding the delicate flowers. She was about to step out when she noticed Darien was already there, one hand propping the door open, the other outstretched toward her.

She took his hand, and he helped her out of the car.

“Take your time,” Darien said, his grip on her hand steady. “Do you want me to hold the flowers?”

“I think I can manage.” She balanced the bouquet—a tasteful mix of cream roses, white lilies, and hydrangea—gently, taking care not to squish them or get pollen all over her long white jacket.

The grave wasn’t far, and it wasn’t hard to spot either. Within a handful of minutes, they were standing before it in silence as a cool breeze that smelled of damp earth and the spice of many flowers blew around them.

*In loving memory of Ivador Langdon,  
Beloved husband, father, son, and teacher  
Died 7297*

Loren let go of Darien's hand and stepped forward, stooping beside the mound of fresh soil. She set down the bouquet among a collection of other ones, being mindful of the carefully placed photographs, family heirlooms, and handwritten letters.

Headmaster Langdon wasn't a bad person. He'd made mistakes, sure, but who didn't? And the mistakes Ivador had made—the ones involving Randal Slade and Calanthe Croft—had been done with the best of intentions, as so many mistakes were. Loren thought of his daughter often, especially when she crossed paths with the new headmaster of AA. And whenever Loren thought of her, she was swallowed up with guilt.

Few people knew the true cause of Ivador's death, and because of the many secrets that needed to be kept, not even his wife or daughter could be trusted with the truth. Withholding it from the two people who'd loved him unconditionally made Loren feel horrible and dirty, but it was a price she needed to pay, not just to obey the imperator, but to protect the people she cared about.

The events of Kalendae were one giant secret they would all carry to their graves.

Wiping at her damp eyes, she stood and shuffled back to Darien's side. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her snug against him.

For a while, the two of them stood there in the serene oasis, looking nowhere but at the words and numbers etched into the headstone. A father who'd loved his daughter so much he'd risked everything for her. His job, his reputation. Even his life, a precious thing he had chosen to part with when the pain of being alive and unable to help his daughter had grown too heavy.

Darien was the first to break the silence. "My mom once told me to always remember that everyone has a story. Even the ones who piss you off or hurt you. And that even the broken ones are usually broken because someone else made them that way." A pause. "So far, her words have rang pretty true. But for the life of me, I can't figure out what or who turned my father into the shithole that he was."

Loren put an arm under his gray jacket and wrapped it around his waist, holding him tight.

Darien drew a deep breath. His next words came out so quickly they tripped over each other. "I don't know, maybe it was *his* father who did it. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

A chill prickled across her hairline. "I don't know about that," she said gently. "I'd say you've rolled pretty far."

Darien cracked a grin. "The tree must've been built on a hill."

"Must've been."

He pulled her close, so close that she stepped on his boot, and kissed her on the forehead. She wrapped her arms around him and rested her face against his chest.

It was quiet here. Peaceful. Even the cars breezing by on the freeway couldn't be heard from where they stood. Birds chirped, a pleasant melody that blended in with the crackle of leaves and the creak of branches. Stately mausoleums dotted the lush landscape, and resident peacocks perched atop headstones, their brilliant blue plumage blurred by the fall of twilight. Night was nearly here.

Loren lifted her head, arms still circling Darien, and glanced about the grounds. "Where is...?" She knew the person she was inquiring about wouldn't be buried here at Eternal Light; this place was too new, built only recently to accommodate the spike in deaths caused by the Tricking. But she had meant to ask Darien this question for some time now; had wanted to offer to go with him the next time he visited her.

Darien abruptly released her, cool air wrapping around her limbs with the absence of his touch, and started walking back to the car. He was several feet away by the time he found his voice. "ACC." Angelthene City Cemetery.

Tucking her white jacket around her body to keep the wind out, Loren followed behind him. The sound of grass crunching under her wedge heels was soon replaced with the thud of concrete as they reached the road that would take them back to the car.

Suddenly, Darien stopped.

Loren stopped, too.

His back was still facing her when he spoke. "I never went to her funeral." His deep voice was hushed, the words nearly blowing away in the breeze. Loren strained to hear the rest of what he said. "I was so upset and broken, I couldn't find the strength to go. I haven't stopped regretting it since. If I could go back, if I could redo it—" The words broke off into a silence that choked the whole area.

Loren took one step before stopping again. "Everyone has different ways of coping."

"I cope by running away." He still wasn't facing her. "That's not brave, that's cowardly. I'd rather run from my pain than face it, and there is no excuse for that." The words were coated in ice. Loren understood how long he'd harbored this information, how long he'd dwelled on it, unwilling to forgive himself.

Loren stepped up to his side and slid her fingers under his sleeve, wrapping them around his wrist. His pulse raced under her thumb. "You have to try to forgive yourself, Darien."

His throat shifted with a heavy swallow. "It hurts, baby. But the thing is, I don't want it to stop hurting. I don't want to forget, I don't want to move on. She deserves to be remembered." A lone magpie flew into a nearby tree. "Her real name was Elsie. Emberley was the name she gave herself when she ran away from home, a young woman stupid in love." Silver jingled as he tugged the wing-shaped locket up from where it was hidden under his shirt. "This is all I have left to remember her by. This and some old photographs. There are only a few left. My dad burned all the others before I had a chance to get to them."

"Your dad was an asshole." The words wobbled on her tongue. "And you are *nothing* like him." She hugged him again, unable to bear looking at his pained expression any longer.

Minutes passed as she clung to him. He was still as a statue, hands hanging at his sides instead of around her. Never had she felt him this tense; even his chest quavered under her cheek when he breathed in.

"You know what I dream about?" The question Darien voiced was softer than a hum.

Loren peeked up at him. He kept staring straight ahead, looking but not seeing.

"I dream about looking in the mirror and feeling proud of the person staring back at me. I dream...I dream of finding peace." His arms closed around her. She heard him swallow, heard him draw a ragged breath. "I told myself years ago that I would get there one day, no matter what it took. But *one day* seems so fucking far away." He gripped her tighter, one of his hands stroking the back of her hair. "You make me happier than I've ever been, Loren. I can see myself having that life with you, can see us building our *one day* together. I can see myself there, clearer than ever, and I want it. I want all of it."

"You'll have it," she whispered hoarsely. "I promise."

"Cross your heart?" Even though he was teasing, she could hear the uncertainty in the question, the need for reassurance that one day he might finally get to where he wanted to be.

"Cross my heart, Darien." Closing her eyes, she turned her face into his chest, breathing in the scent of him—the scent of her person. Her *home*. "Cross my heart."

—

Darien had been staring at the closed door to Erasmus Sophronia's townhouse for so long, he'd memorized how many lines were in the wood, how many flecks of rust were on the doorknob. The ticking of the watch on his wrist was incessant. They were already ten minutes late, and not because of their time spent at Eternal Light Memorial

Gardens, but because of how long they'd lingered on this doorstep. But he would stand here for as long as Loren needed him to, even if it took all night.

All the lights in the house were on, the rattle of dishes and the clang of pots floating through a cracked-open window. The neighborhood was in the district of Oceana, only about a ten-minute drive from the Avenue of the Scarlet Star during periods of light traffic. It was picturesque and quiet, tucked away from the usual noise of Angelthene's urban sprawl. The grid of townhouses was protected by spells, the streets lined with the best and brightest LED lights on the market. The lights were designed to come on when the sun went down, which would be happening any minute now.

Darien glanced at Loren, who was standing stiffly beside him on the front steps, clutching the neck of a bottle of chardonnay before her. She had been watching the door with an unblinking gaze for so long that he wondered how her eyes hadn't completely dried out. Moths were fluttering about, charmed by the porchlight. The LED streetlights dotting the sidewalk flared to life as the sun ducked below the horizon, leaving behind the faintest stripe of amber that turned the buildings, palms, and cacti into stark silhouettes.

"Sweetheart—" Darien tried.

"Do you think he even likes chardonnay?" Loren asked. She kept staring at the door, a deer trapped in headlights.

"He'll love the chardonnay," Darien assured her. "But do you know what he'll love even more?"

Those big eyes of hers stayed on the door, even as he tilted his head slightly, attempting to draw her attention. "Mmm?" she prompted.

"Having his daughter for company."

She nibbled her lip. "You think so?"

"I know so."

She took a deep breath, blew it out through pursed lips, and stepped up to the door, fist raised to knock.

When the distant rumble of her father's voice floated through the window screen, she dropped her hand and retreated down the steps, heels clomping on cement. "We'll come back another time."

Darien followed her to the sidewalk. "Baby, hold on."

"Maybe we'll tell him we had somewhere we needed to be, something we forgot to do. We'll think of something—"

Just as she was stepping out onto the street that was lined with date palms, nearly throwing herself in front of a moving car, he caught her by the wrist, yanking her back against his body. The driver looked like he was about to slam his fist on the horn, but wisely stopped when he realized who was standing on the side of the road.

Being this recognizable certainly had its perks.

“Hold on a second,” Darien said, steadying her with his hands on her shoulders.

There was terror in her eyes when she looked up at him, hair sticking to her lip gloss. That terror had nothing to do with the fact that she’d almost been run over by a vehicle, he knew.

Darien kept his tone soft. “I’m not going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do. But I know you, and I know that you really want to do this. You’re just scared, and that’s okay. It’s okay to be scared sometimes. But you know who else is scared?”

The strand of hair that was caught in her mouth fluttered with her heavy breathing. “Who? You?”

He chuckled. “No, not me, sweetheart. Your *dad*. I bet he spent most of the day preparing for this dinner, and he’s in there right now shitting himself watching the clock.” He laced his fingers with hers. They were so small compared to his own, and they were trembling like the palm tree fronds tossed about by the wind. “If you want to go back home, I’ll take you back home. But if you want to walk in there and get this done, I’ll be right there with you for all of it, awkward conversations and all. You’re not alone, and you never will be. Cross my heart.”

That won him a smile. The stunning kind that took his breath away and made him weak in the knees. Damn, she was gorgeous. He fell in love with her all over again every single day.

She blew out a shaky laugh. “Cross your heart,” she repeated with a nod. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Let’s do this.”

—

Darien knew he’d promised to be there for Loren through the whole dinner, awkward conversations and all. But goddamn, was this awkward. As the seconds dragged by at a pace that was torturous enough to make him want to impale himself on his fork, he started to wonder why Erasmus had even bothered inviting them.

They were seated at the dining room table, the squeak of knives and forks on fancy dishes the only sound to break the heavy-as-fuck silence. A ridiculous amount of food was spread before them—bowls of salads and vegetables, platters of chicken and ham, mashed potatoes, a pyramid of dinner rolls, and a fruit-flavored gelatin dessert. That dessert jiggled every time Darien bumped the table or tried to play footsie with Loren, who was seated across from him, to



help with her nerves.

Loren and Erasmus had said next to nothing to each other since the moment their greetings were over and done with, and the limited amount of conversation that had taken place in the hour afterward was the small talk between Darien and the rabbit messenger, who'd introduced herself by the name of Cyra.

Without the mask covering her face, Cyra looked nothing like he'd imagined, though he never gave much thought to the identities of Darkslaying messengers. Guessing a person's physical age wasn't always easy, but he thought she was in her late twenties, early thirties. A hellseher with thick strawberry-blonde hair, a lightly freckled face, and eyes that couldn't decide if they were blue or green. At first, Darien wondered if she was related to Erasmus in some way, but none of her features backed up the possibility. Nothing about her really stood out, aside from the scar below her jaw, the same scar Darien recalled seeing the night she'd offered him the job to find Loren out front of the Pit.

The fact that Cyra was a hellseher raised a lot of questions. Hellsehers didn't typically work as rabbit messengers. And besides that, why hadn't she used her own Sight to track Loren down? Why send a Devil on a mission that could've ended in tragedy?

Darien shook the thoughts away and forced himself to focus.

Every once in a while, Erasmus would make eye contact with Loren, only for the both of them to swiftly look away from each other, as if they'd witnessed something horribly embarrassing.

Darien cleared his throat. "I don't mean to be blunt, but this is fucking awkward." He set down his fork. "Did you plan on talking to your daughter, or staring at your food the whole time? The potatoes can't be that interesting."

"Darien!" Loren hissed, kicking him in the shin under the table.

"What? It needed to be said."

"No, he's right," Erasmus sighed. "I'm s-sorry, you two. This is... well, it's embarrassing." Another sigh made Darien's fingers twitch with the need to reach into his throat and rip out his words. Erasmus's speech impediment caused him to stutter, usually every second sentence, occasionally every third. "L-lily—"

"Loren," she interrupted stiffly, hand tightening on her fork. "I prefer to be called Loren. I barely know who Lily was, and I'm not Lily."

The clock hanging on the wall ticked loudly. Cyra was still eating, but she froze then, jaw stilling.

Darien clapped his hands together twice. "Great!" he encouraged. "You've learned one thing about her. That's a start."

"There's a lot to learn," Erasmus said around a huff of nervous

laughter. "If I'm b-being honest, I don't really know what to ask."

"I actually have some questions," Loren said, "if you don't mind."

Erasmus wore the same expression his daughter had worn when they were standing outside: a deer frozen in the glow of headlights. Still, he swallowed and choked out, "Ask away."

"Where've you been?" she began. "How long have you been alive? How did you start aging again?" The words tumbled together. "Do Roark and Taega know you're alive? How can you be sitting here right now when your skeleton was found in a grave in the National—"

"That's a l-lot of questions," Erasmus tried, but Loren kept speaking.

"Does the real Well still exist?" she pressed, her heart palpitating in her chest. "Why did you leave that scroll in the Old Hall? Why did you even *write* it?"

"Lily," Erasmus tried. When he caught his mistake, he quickly amended, "Loren—"

"If you're mortal again, then what happened to the Well? Wasn't it a part of you before?"

"P-please," Erasmus stammered, "slow down."

"Did you miss me at all?"

Silence. Everyone had stopped breathing, stopped chewing.

Loren's face was burning up, her gaze intense. "Or did you forget I existed the moment you dumped me at the temple?"

The awkward and heavy silence that followed her question was worse than the one that had preceded it.

Finally, Erasmus spoke, his voice strangled. "I did it to protect you."

Loren was glaring at him. "I'd *really* like to hear that story."

"There were p-people that wanted me dead. Lots of people. I c-couldn't risk your life. So, your mother and I decided it was best to let you go, at least until we could get everything sorted out."

"Where is she?" Loren's jaw was clenched. "My mother?"

Erasmus and Cyra exchanged a glance. It was Cyra who said, "She passed away years ago."

Loren shoved a carrot to the side of her plate. It took her a few seconds before she was able to look at Erasmus and Cyra again. "What was her name?"

The answer came from both of them. "Helia."

Loren grabbed her glass and took a long swig of chardonnay, eyes watering as she gulped it down. Holding the last swallow in her mouth, she set down the glass, a look of concentration on her face as she likely debated what to say next.

Finally, she swallowed...looked up at Erasmus. "I was told that you created me by using a piece of your own aura. If I have a mother, that

means she must've had a part in creating me too."

Erasmus's chair creaked as he adjusted his position. "Roark and Taega believe I'm dead, and I would l-like to keep it that way," he said, entirely ignoring her question. "At least for now."

Loren's brows shot up. "So we're going to play games, are we? You choose which questions you answer, and ignore the ones you don't want to acknowledge?"

Erasmus had nothing to say.

"How do I have the Well powers?" There was a stumble in her heartbeat that put Darien on high alert, hand curling into a fist on the table, knuckles digging into the pristine white cloth. Loren's jaw flexed, her heart tripping over another beat. "Can you answer that one?"

"Y-you inherited them," Erasmus said, "like people inherit genes."

"Where is the real Well? Does it still exist?"

"Loren—" Erasmus tried.

"Why are you avoiding answering pretty much every question I've asked? You sought me out, invited me for dinner, and you expect me not to ask for an explanation after I spent almost two decades believing that you were dead, and after being chased down by people in the city because I suddenly had magic I never even knew I had?"

Darien leaned forward in his seat. "Alright, let's cool down for a minute." He jerked his chin at Loren's forearm. "Eat. Your tattoo." The serpent-entwined rod was glowing red, and her heart was racing so fast, it made Darien's race, too.

She speared a carrot, dunked it in mashed potatoes, and popped it into her mouth, chewing quickly.

Erasmus rubbed his chin, his focus on his daughter's tattoo. "How l-long has that been happening?"

"Her whole life," Darien replied icily. "If you'd been around for any of it, you would know that." Now, it was *his* turn to be pissed. Loren was staring at her plate, eating slowly, her face flushed. Her eyes were shimmering, and Darien knew that if her mouth wasn't busy chewing, it would likely be wobbling from emotion.

He hated seeing her upset. He fucking hated it more than anything in the world. It made him want to rip out hearts and crack open skulls and burn entire buildings to the ground.

"I want to thank you." Erasmus was speaking to *him* now. "For keeping her safe."

"No one else was going to do it, were they?" He looked at Loren, whose eyes were still on her plate. His voice softened as he added, "But it's been my absolute pleasure."

"Why did you pick him?" Loren speared another carrot and swirled it in gravy.

"It was my idea," Cyra said. "We needed you found and hidden as fast as possible, so we hired the best person for the job."

"I could've killed her." The words were out of Darien's mouth before he realized what he was saying.

Loren looked up, her fork stilling.

"We t-trusted that you wouldn't," Erasmus said gently. "And we trusted that the other people who were after her wouldn't be able to get through you if they tried."

When Darien blinked, the room plunged into darkness and glowing colors. "That's a lot of faith to put in a stranger." He blinked again, and it went away. But that familiar crawling sensation lingered beneath his skin, and he knew he only had so much time left.

"And I-look at you now," Erasmus said smugly, a faint smile on his mouth—a smile so similar to Loren's. "I'd say our assumptions about you were correct. The safest place for her is with you."

Darien shoved his chair back and stood. "Excuse me for a minute."

Loren dropped her fork to her placemat. "Darien—"

Eyes black, vision filled with bleeding colors that were like the glow of certain objects under a black light, Darien could do nothing but wave her away as he went out onto the balcony, closing the sliding glass door behind him.

In the cool night air, he focused on breathing, on stopping his head from spinning.

He had been able to keep Loren safe until now, but what would come next? He was about to get in deep with not just Gaven, but also Randal's men, and if she got hurt, if anything bad happened to her, if he made *one* wrong move with the other Darkslaying houses—

He gripped the railing. It groaned under his strength, such a feeble thing, it almost snapped.

If the day came when he drowned, he would drown alone—he'd make damn sure of that. He would never let anything happen to her. He just had to keep control of the situation.

Keep control—and keep his head above the water.

—

"If there's one question you can answer for me tonight, let it be this one," Loren began as she handed Erasmus another soapy dish. He turned the tap on hot and rinsed it off. Behind them, Cyra was packing up the leftovers and stacking the containers in the crowded fridge. Although she made no indication that she was listening, Loren suspected she was hanging off every word. "How can I help him?"

Darien was still out on the balcony. She'd stepped outside to ask him if he wanted to come in and finish the rest of his dinner, but he'd

told her he was done, being careful not to turn around and let her see the black in his eyes. He'd only eaten half of what was on his plate.

"Surges, right?" Erasmus asked, setting the dish on the rack to dry.

Loren grabbed a pot and began scrubbing the crust of gravy off the bottom. "Almost every night. I used to be able to help him with my powers, but...they're gone. Ever since Kalendae, I haven't been able to summon them. Can you tell me how?"

"Ah, Loren, I uh..." He rubbed his shaven chin. "I don't really know if that's such a good idea."

She dragged the sponge over the bottom of the pot, stainless steel shrieking. "You don't know what he's done for me. How much he's sacrificed for me. I don't care if my body isn't built to handle it, I would..." Die for him. She would die for him, and she wouldn't think twice about it.

"Your type of magic is very, ah...how d-do I put this?"

"Loren?"

Loren turned to see Darien walking into the kitchen. His eyes weren't black anymore, but his face was lined with exhaustion, his muscles tense under his shirt. The Surge wasn't gone, and likely wouldn't go away until he did something about it.

Blood—the price he always had to pay.

Darien choked out, "I'm so sorry—"

Loren dropped the sponge into the water. "Don't be. We were done anyway."

He faced Erasmus. "I'm sorry to cut this so short."

"You don't need to apologize," Erasmus said, holding up a sudsy hand. "I understand what you're going through. B-believe me."

"Thanks for dinner," Loren said stiffly, shoving the soapy pot into Erasmus's hand. "And for, you know, all the non-answers. We had a great time." She dried her hands on the dish towel hanging from the cupboard below the sink and made her way to Darien's side.

Erasmus stuttered, "W-wait, Loren. Wait. Please."

Loren paused beside Darien and looked over her shoulder.

"Your answers," Erasmus began, looking pained. "I can give them to you in time. I s-swear. *In time.*"

Loren rolled her eyes, feeling guilty as soon as she did it. "Time, sure. Because you've been great at giving me that so far." She grasped Darien's wrist and walked away.

Erasmus's tone was desperate as he called, "Why don't we m-meet again next week?"

Loren couldn't stop her next words before they floated off her tongue. "Maybe in another twenty years." She mumbled over her shoulder, "Thanks for dinner, Cyra. It was wonderful."

The messenger said nothing as they put on their shoes and jackets

and walked out.

Loren could feel Darien staring at her as he followed behind her, out the front door and across the street to his car. He didn't say anything, and she didn't say anything to him either. What they both needed was silence and the space to think. With silence and each other's company, they would make it through this. She knew they could.

Loren's wedge heels clomped on the stairs as she walked into the basement, following the echo of male shouting, laughter, and the thud of what sounded like fists.

In an hour, she would have to head to Mordred and Penelope's for her Saturday shift. She'd already booked a taxi before realizing Darien was still at home for once. She didn't plan on canceling her ride and bothering him to drive her, but she *did* want to say goodbye to him before she left the house.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, she took a left, heading past the gym and into a separate workout area, a room reserved for different training activities such as power striking—which was exactly what Darien, Travis, Tanner, and Jack were doing now. Jack and Travis were lounging on a bench by a wall of mirrors, watching as Darien struck the punch shield Tanner held before him.

Darien's precision was deadly. He moved quickly—almost too quickly for her mortal eyes to track, fists lashing out with blinding speed. His feet were bare, and sweat glistened on his back and chest, his gray shorts clinging in places to his muscular thighs. He hadn't put on any gloves. In fact, his hands weren't even wrapped.

When Tanner declared that it would be the last hit before they took a break, Darien struck—hard.

Tanner fell back against the wall and nearly went down, catching himself against it with a grunt. The others went silent, waiting, but there was an air of humor in the room that suggested they'd seen this happen many times before.

Shoving away from the wall, eyes blazing, Tanner threw the shield aside and pushed his glasses up onto his head. "You always do that!"

Darien was trying not to laugh. "Gotta keep you on your toes, Atlas." He clapped Tanner on the back, but the hacker shrugged him off, grumbling under his breath as he went to retrieve the shield from where it had rolled against the mirrors.

"Dare." Jack's eyes danced as he jerked his chin at Loren. She drifted into the room, stopping on the edge of the mat. "She just figured out how much of a bully you are."

"Bullies wouldn't take bullets for their asshole friends." He flashed her a smile and pushed the hair out of his face. "Morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning. I'm sorry for interrupting."

“You’re never interrupting, and don’t ever apologize.”

She looked around the room. “Don’t you get enough practice at the Pit?” She realized a second too late—as every guy in the room aside from Darien gave a collective “Ooh!”—that the question sounded condescending. Her eyes widened, and she held up her hands in surrender. “I totally didn’t mean—”

“Are you being cheeky with me?” Darien was fighting a smile. And it was that smile that erased all her former feelings of worry.

She straightened her skirt and cleared her throat, the four male gazes weighing on her, Darien’s heavier than the rest—always heavier than the rest. “So what if I am?” She matched Darien’s playful tone.

“Then I would have to teach you a lesson.”

“Okay.” She barely managed to squeak out the word as her attention went to his abs—rock-hard and glistening with drops of sweat. The sight of him sucked the oxygen right out of her lungs. “Umm, I need to leave in an hour, but I wanted to say goodbye before I...” Her words trailed off into silence as Darien advanced on her with a lupine smile. She gulped, twisting her fingers together. It took all her willpower not to back up. “I can’t get sweaty, I have to work soon.”

Darien’s smile stretched into a grin that he tossed over his shoulder at the guys. They were smiling, too—even Tanner. “Did you guys hear that? She can’t get sweaty.” He walked right up to her—so close, she could feel the heat coming off his body. Grabbing her around the small of her back, he pulled her close, his stomach bumping hers. He looked down at her, a strand of his hair falling in his face. “How about a quick lesson on how to throw a punch?”

Her mouth was bone-dry. “I don’t need to throw punches. I have you to throw them for me.”

The subtle spark of rage in his eyes suggested his thoughts had gone to the students who bullied her at school—the ones she refused to let him deal with. She’d put up with bullying her whole life; she was used to it, had even come to expect it. The ones at AA weren’t worth a minute of her time, or his. Besides, she didn’t really want Darien to go to jail for murdering three students. If he found out how much she’d downplayed the bullying, she wasn’t sure how he would react.

Murder was a probable outcome.

“I might not always be around to do the fighting for you,” Darien said, thumb inching under the band of her skirt. His attention was on her mouth, that stare so heated it sent a shiver down her spine. “Besides, I’ve wanted to teach you how to defend yourself for a while now, so this is long overdue.”

Letting go of her skirt, he lowered himself to his knees before her



and bowed his head. His hair brushed against her thigh, tickling her skin as he began to undo the strap on her left shoe.

Her heart jumped up her throat, and a wave of intense heat crawled across her body. She was very aware of the others staring as Darien slowly undid the strap and slid her foot out of her shoe.

Looking up at her from under dark eyelashes, that stare of his cranking up the heat in the room, he carefully set her foot down on the mat. It was cold on her bare skin, and it sank a little under her weight. She knew Darien wasn't the only one who noticed how shallow and ragged her breathing had become, how fast her pulse was racing.

Both of his hands went to her other leg, one cupping her ankle while the other slid up her calf, callouses scraping her skin. There was heat everywhere he touched, a feeling she craved on the parts of her body that were far more sensitive than her legs.

Darien didn't tear his gaze from hers as he loosened the strap on her shoe, every movement deliberately drawn out. The fact that they weren't alone had kept her on edge until now, but her body fully yielded to him then. She felt herself get wet from how intense that stare was as he kept looking up at her, how badly she wanted the hand that was wrapped around her ankle to touch her between the legs. He would make her feel so good, and she wanted it now. Even if she ended up late for work, it would be worth it. *He* was worth it.

She couldn't help it—her teeth went to her bottom lip. The breath she drew was audible and shaky, and she knew every Devil in this room instantly picked up on it. Filthy thoughts flooded her mind, and she was too lost in them to feel embarrassed by any whimpering that slipped out, or by any of the faces she was making.

The sound that rose from deep in Darien's chest was a cross between a sigh and a growl. "Alright, I can't do this, you're going to have to leave." He waved a hand at the guys and barked, "Get out of here, unless you'd like to watch."

While Jack and Tanner promptly gathered their things, Travis stayed seated and continued to stare, mouth stretched into a wide grin. "I like to watch, if you know what I mean."

All four of them burst into laughter that bounced against the walls and low ceiling. Loren felt her face turn red as Tanner grabbed Travis by the back of his collar, dragging him to his feet and out of the room.

As soon as they were alone, Darien looked up at her again. He finished taking off her second shoe, set it on the mat, and stood, hand trailing off the arch of her foot. Without the added height from her heels, he loomed over her, intimidating as ever.

She idly smoothed her skirt, palms warm and sweaty, mouth drier than a desert. "What are we doing?"

"I'm going to teach you how to throw a punch." He grabbed her by the chin and kissed her hard on the mouth. When he broke the kiss, he kept his face close to hers, hand still grasping her chin. She could feel his breath on her lips when he growled, "And then you're going to make a mess on my cock. How does that sound?"

"Good." The word wobbled on her tongue.

Darien stepped back several paces and held up his hands, palms facing her. "Take a swing at me."

She glanced about. "Shouldn't we use that punching thing?"

He gave her a look of exaggerated disappointment. "Loren, baby, come on, that punching thing is for hard hitting." He beckoned her forward with a crook of his index finger. She took a step closer, mat dipping under her feet. The air electrified the closer they got to each other. Loren imagined that if it were possible to see sexual chemistry, there would be a full-blown storm between them. "We're going to start slow. I think I can handle your little knuckle bumps until we get into the real deal."

"I'll show you hard hitting," she grumbled. That made him smile.

She wound her arm back and struck his open palm. When the thud of flesh connecting with flesh was barely audible, she realized how lightly she'd hit him. When she tried to pull her fist back, his fingers closed around it, holding firm.

"Lorennnn," he tsked, shaking his head. He pointed at her fist that was still clutched in his hand. "*This* is all wrong. This isn't how you break someone's jaw, it's how you break your thumb."

She blinked up at him. "You really think I can break someone's jaw?"

"Sure I do. You just haven't been taught how."

"*Me?* Break a jaw?" She yanked her fist out of his hand and flexed her right arm in the air, looking pointedly at the lack of muscle there, feeble as a noodle. "With *these* bad boys?"

He barked a deep laugh that echoed, the attractive sound filling the basement. "You're adorable." He snatched her hand back into his and moved her fingers around, gently bending them this way and that, until they were forming a fist that satisfied him. He held up his hands again and stepped back a pace. "Try again."

She rushed forward and struck his right palm.

"Better, but you don't need to leap like a frog every time you punch, Rookie. What am I, a lily pad?"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Grinning, he backed away again and dipped his chin in a prompting nod. "Again."

The lesson continued for about ten minutes, and by the time they were done, she was out of breath, her knuckles red and stinging. She

wasn't even hitting that hard. Clearly, it would take a lot of practice before breaking a jaw became a possibility. She still thought Darien was wrong about that.

When she was on her last hit, Darien's fingers closed around her fist, holding her still. The look on his face could only be described as devilish, a handsome smile tugging at one side of his mouth.

He abruptly let go and bent down, just low enough that he could grab her around the backs of her thighs. She gasped as he hoisted her up, hooking her legs around his waist. The dimple in his cheek was showing off as he smiled up at her.

"You *are* a bully," she teased, lowering her mouth to his, grazing but not kissing. She dragged her nails up his back, feeling the chiseled muscle beneath his smooth skin.

"And you're a brat." His hands were now cupping her bottom, fingers digging into her flesh. "You know what I do to brats like you?"

She greedily ran her tongue across his lower lip. "Show me."

Holding onto her with that same strong grip that never faltered, no matter how long he carried her for, he pushed her up against the wall, pinning her to it with his hips. She could feel his erection pressing between her legs, hard and demanding. The need to be closer to him swallowed her whole, and her heart began to race, her insides clenching tight. She grinded on his length, desperate for any bit of friction she could get.

"Fuck, you're bad," he panted through his teeth. His lips slammed against hers. He rubbed his cock into her clit, the wall digging into her back. Her skirt bunched up, exposing her ass to the cold surface. The temperature raised a chill on her skin, the heat from his hands making it feel even colder. Just as she was whimpering into his mouth, he was groaning into hers. "You drive me crazy," he mumbled against her lips.

"Likewise."

"You want me to fuck you now?" His hand was already under her skirt, tugging her thong to the side.

She dampened her lips, longing to taste him again, and he'd only just pulled away. "Please."

He slid his fingers along her entrance, feeling how wet she was for him. That gaze of his darkened, not with the Sight, but with a need as strong as her own. "Please what?"

"Fuck me, Darien." Desperation made her tone breathy. "Please."

"How do you want it?"

"Against this wall."

He sank his middle finger into her, making her shudder. As he slid it back out and in again, he watched her face intently, jaw clenched tight, eyes blazing with desire. "How hard?"

“Hard enough that you’ll need to carry me around for the rest of the day,” she breathed. She caught sight of their reflection, an image that always surprised her. There was such contrast between the two of them, yet they fit perfectly. Night and dawn, blending as one. The Devil and the white lily.

“Good girl.” He added another finger, stretching her good. “You know I like it rough.” He pushed them in all the way. She whimpered, her breath fanning his mouth. The approval in his stare was scorching, and it only grew as she felt herself squeezing his fingers. “Promise me you’ll never stop wearing skirts.”

Another whimper slipped out of her, and she dug her nails into his shoulders. “I need you.”

“Promise me.” He took his hand out from between her legs, leaving her bereft of his touch so he could balance her better as he reached for the band of his shorts, the shape of his cock showing through them, a sight that had her mouth drying out, her heart skipping with anticipation. “Promise me, or you’re not getting any.”

“I prom—”

“Darien!” Max’s voice was a thunderclap that echoed down the stairs and bounced into the room.

“Fuck,” Darien groaned, his head falling forward against her chest in defeat, his hair tickling her neck. When she started to giggle, he pressed a hand to her mouth. “Shh! He’ll hear us—”

“*Darien!*” Max called again. “I know you’re down there.”

Darien kept his hand over Loren’s mouth, and it was a good thing he did, because she felt another laugh bubble up to her lips. He shouted back, “Darien isn’t here right now!”

There was a brief pause. “Put Loren down and come upstairs.”

Darien’s head whipped to the side, and he glared in the direction of the stairs. “Are you spying on me? Turn your Sight off, you creep.”

“This is important, man. I wouldn’t be interrupting your pussy appointment if it wasn’t.”

“You’re gone all night, and now you want my attention?”

“Yes, if that wasn’t completely and totally obvious from the fact that I am—” There was a pause, and it sounded like he cupped his hands over his mouth for the rest of the sentence as he finished, “—*shouting down the stairs at you!*”

“Get the fuck out of here.” Even though Darien mumbled the retort, Loren knew it didn’t slip past Max’s keen hellseher hearing.

“Upstairs—now.”

With a smile, Darien whispered, “He’s starting to sound like me.”

Loren didn’t fight her giggle this time. His eyes lit up at the sound of it, and he pressed a kiss between her brows.

“*DARIENNNNN!*” This time, the lights rattled.

Darien cringed from the volume. "Cool your balls already, I'm coming!" he called. He winked at her and added, "I wish it was the other kind of coming."

She snickered. "You're so dirty."

He set her on her feet, hands sliding up her ass. "You love it."

"I do." She stood on her tiptoes for another kiss, and he bent to press his lips softly against hers. "Very much."

It took all her self control to let go of his arms. Spinning on a heel, she fixed her skirt and headed for her shoes, glancing back at him.

He spanked her ass hard enough to sting, and she scooted away with a teasing gasp.

"Later?" he asked.

She scooped up her heels. "Later." Her face heated at the thought. She wished their fun hadn't been interrupted, but she was running out of time. Her shift was looming, and she wasn't about to upset Mordred and Penelope by opening the apothecary late, no matter how tempting it sounded. "What do you think Max wants?" she asked.

Pushing the hair that was dampened with sweat out of his face, he grabbed a black shirt off the bench and pulled it on. "Let's find out."

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Loren's temple rested against Darien's as they leaned across the dining room table, looking closely at the photograph Dallas was showing them on her phone.

Loren had to force the last of the desire from her body, her close proximity with Darien threatening to push her thoughts back into forbidden territory. Never mind the fact that she was perched on his knee at the head of the table.

Everyone was here. All of the Devils, along with Sabrine, Logan, and Dominic. Sabrine was sitting in Logan's lap, the alpha wolf's arm wrapped around her waist. Max stood behind Dallas's chair, arms crossed. Tanner and Travis were eating from a pink box of pastries, the logo of Whisking Witch marking the lid.

Blue was here too, of course. It was her photo everyone was staring at. A mugshot, to be exact.

There was a warrant out for her arrest, along with a reward offered to anyone who provided law enforcement with sufficient information that led to her capture. The news article didn't offer up many details, but it did say she was a danger to the public, a new fact that had everyone in the room on edge.

Everyone but Blue, who only seemed confused, her electric eyes flicking about the area.

Darien sat back in his seat, tugging Loren snug against his chest, a

hand resting on her hip. "Have you managed to translate anything?" he asked Dominic.

"Barely," the Angel replied. "And to tell you the truth, I am beat." He looked like it too. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the way his lids appeared ready to snap shut told them he might drop dead at any second.

Ivy, who'd just finished pouring herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, drifted into the dining room and slid onto Jack's knee. She was still wearing the athletic gear from her morning jog. "Is there anyone who might be able to help?"

"Yup," Logan said. "Arthur. We went to see him at his new job, and he found some old books with passages on Ilevyn." He yawned widely, a reflex that was soon echoed by Sabrina.

"We were working at it nearly all night," Sabrina said around the yawn. So *that* was where they'd all been.

Dominic glanced at Blue. "I tried asking her what's going on with her warrant, and she insisted that she didn't do anything wrong. She said she escaped bad men."

"Bad," Blue repeated. Her eyes were distant. Foggy. But she was nodding and kept saying the same word, again and again. "Bad. Bad."

Dominic's raised brow was directed at Darien. "See?"

Blue's eyes suddenly snapped up to Loren's face. Loren stiffened, and she couldn't stop herself from recoiling into Darien's chest, her hand going to his forearm, as Blue said to her, "They were bad. I needed to kill them. I couldn't let them leave alive, or they were going to hurt me."

Loren blinked. "What?"

The conversations that had only just started ceased. Everyone turned, all eyes falling on her and Blue.

"It's Ilevyn," Darien said, dragging a comforting hand up her back. "Don't even worry about it until Dom and Arthur can translate some more."

Blue looked just as confused as Loren felt. Her next question was a whisper, her eyes boring into Loren's. "You can understand me?" In the morning light streaming in through the windows, her eyes adopted the cobalt hue of a sapphire.

Loren shook her head, mind spinning. Blue asked her another question, but this time the words were tangled up in a language she didn't know: Ilevyn.

"We're going to have to keep her out of the public eye," Darien was saying to Dominic, unfazed by the fact that Blue had just spoken several sentences in their language, the words clear as bells. "Until we figure out what's going on. She can spend her time between here and Death's Landing, if that's alright with you."

“She’s more than welcome at Death’s Landing,” Dom said. “She gets along great with the other Angels. Conrad already taught her how to play poker.” He nudged Blue in the shoulder with a fist. “Isn’t that right, Blue?” But she was still staring at Loren.

“Make sure she wears hats and sunglasses whenever she’s outside,” Darien said. “And do *not* let her remove that talisman.”

Lace teased, “Maybe we should color her hair.”

Ivy grinned. “That sounds like fun.” But when she reached a playful hand toward Blue’s hair, Dominic swatted it away. “Ouch!” Ivy exclaimed.

“You’re not touching one hair on her head.”

Blue tried asking him a question, to which he replied in choppy Ilevyn. His answer made Blue plant both hands on her head, the look of horror on her face earning a giggle from Ivy and a smile from Lace.

Loren turned so she could see Darien’s face. When she almost slid off his knee, he gripped her by the waist, steadying her. “She was speaking Ilevyn?” Loren asked. She wasn’t sure what she was trying to say, exactly. But she could have sworn...

“Yeah, it’s called Ilevyn.” Confusion marred Darien’s features. He reached up to brush a strand of hair that was caught in her eyelashes aside. “It’s an old language—as old as Ancient Reunerian but even harder to learn.”

Blue had been speaking Ilevyn.

So why had Loren somehow understood what she was saying?

With a rattling breath, Loren got to her feet. “I think I hear my cab. I need to get to work.”

“You called a cab?” Darien’s hand closed around her wrist. “I can drive you.” There was a weight to his words that suggested he was worried about more than he was letting on.

Typical Darien—probably overthinking and causing himself more stress than necessary.

“It’s okay, you’re busy.” She bent down to kiss him. A kiss that was brief, but just as sweet as all the rest, the kind that transported her away from here, their surroundings melting away.

When they broke the kiss, Darien brought his hand up to her jaw, knuckles trailing along it. “You still got that knife on you?”

She nodded. The blade with the handle of carved bone hadn’t left her purse since he gave it to her, two days after Kalendae.

“You remember what I taught you?” He’d given her a couple lessons on how to use it, mainly where to strike to do the most damage if a threat had her cornered. His lessons were extremely informative, but she prayed she would never have to put them to use.

“I remember,” she assured him, straightening. He let his hand slide off her wrist, his touch lingering long after he’d let go, a memory

printed on her skin. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I need to pay a visit to the House of Souls."

"That Malakai alliance thingy?"

"Yeah, the Malakai alliance thingy." He winked.

Lace muttered, voice dripping with sarcasm, "That is going to be one fun night."

"Can I come?" Loren asked.

Darien glanced about the room. "We'll talk about that later."

Dallas had been nodding off, but she suddenly sat up in her chair like she was being electrocuted. "If she's going, so am I!" she exclaimed.

Loren swallowed the laughter that bubbled up her throat.

Darien rolled his eyes so far back into his head that the whites showed. "That is *exactly* what I was afraid of."

The witch gave him a smug smile. "No double standards allowed in this friend group, Darien." Crossing her arms, she nestled back into her chair, eyelids visibly heavy.

"Oh, I am very aware of that, Dallas," Darien replied. "You have *not* let me forget that once."

Max, who was standing behind Dal's chair, offered, "It actually might not be a bad idea."

Dallas clapped her hands, tipping her head back to look her boyfriend in the face. "Thank you, Maximus!"

Max explained to Darien, "You told me you were worried about Delaney assuming an ambush when all of us pull up at his door."

Darien raised a brow. "And bringing more people is somehow going to lessen that assumption?"

It was Tanner who said, "Bringing two girls who are not only young but also seemingly unthreatening might."

Jack said, "Yippee, babysitting." The comment earned him a glare from Dallas.

Loren looked at Darien again, and she saw that his attention was already on her. "We'll talk about it later," he repeated. But the tone in his voice told her they'd already won.

The House of Souls was on the schedule for that night, and she knew she would spend her whole shift digesting the fact that she would soon be inside the home of Malakai Delaney, the leader of the second most powerful Darkslayer house in Angelthene.



The trip to the House of Souls was quiet and tense. Loren was in the back seat of Darien's car with Dallas and Tanner, Maximus in the passenger's seat. Behind them, riding with Travis in his car, were Lace, Ivyana, and Jack. Loren imagined it was just as quiet and tense in their vehicle as it was in Darien's.

Resting her head against the cool glass of her window, she watched the streetlights and palm trees pass by in blurs. Far above the city, the forcefield shimmered, a faint green that was only visible to the mortal eye from certain angles. It tinted the canvas of stars behind it, making the sky look like it was flecked with shattered emeralds instead of diamonds.

By the time the car turned into an old neighborhood across from Angelthene City Cemetery, Loren was fighting to keep her eyes open. They were so dry, she could hear her lids blinking.

The neighborhood was located in the western side of Oldtown, not far from Angelthene International Airport. Every house in the area was large and impressive, the grid of tree-lined streets adorned with beds of succulents and black roses. Thick blankets of creeping ivy covered faded red-brick walls, the five-pointed leaves nearly swallowing up the gold address plaques that were nailed to the brick. The streetlamps here were elaborately curling decorations, rose garlands and angelic beings molded into the cast iron posts. The bulbs were round and made of white glass, the light they emitted mimicking moonbeams.

Loren glanced at Dallas, who looked just as awake and alert as the Devils. Surprising, considering hellsehers could survive on less sleep than humans, *veneficae*, and werewolves.

"How are you not tired?" Loren whispered.

Dallas fidgeted, her attention fixed on the view through the windshield. "I had a lot of coffee."

Loren's phone buzzed in her back pocket. She lifted herself up and checked the message.

*Be at the gates in one hour.*

She frowned. She didn't recognize the number.

With a swipe of her thumb, she deleted the message and slid her phone back in her pocket.

Darien pulled into a parking stall several houses down, where the

car would be hidden from view, should anyone decide to look out the windows in the House of Souls. Most of those windows were aglow with buttery light that spilled out onto the lawn, but aside from this, there was no other sign of life in the neighborhood. The other houses were dark and quiet, and combined with the location of the cemetery, the area held an eeriness that made a person not want to speak too loudly.

Loren watched in silence as the Devils prepared their weapons. The whole situation teleported her back in time to Cain's neighborhood, and for one dizzying minute, she couldn't distinguish between the two. The only thing lacking here was a chained storm-drain demon growling like a dog on the front lawn.

She really didn't miss that memory.

The leather of Darien's seat groaned as he turned around to look at her. "You sure you don't want to wait here?"

Dallas replied before she could speak. "Yeah, we're sure, Darien. We didn't come all this way for nothing."

Leaning over Loren, the witch hit the unlock button on the door and pulled on the handle. A cool breeze slipped through the cracked-open door, and even though Loren was wearing high-rise jeans, a knitted cardigan overtop of a white tank top, and her thickest pair of socks in white sneakers, goosebumps prickled across her skin.

"That's what I was afraid of," Darien muttered.

Loren unbuckled her seatbelt and got out before Dallas could roll her onto the ground.

Lace, Ivy, Jack, and Travis were waiting on the sidewalk, talking quietly among themselves as they slid guns into holsters and knives into sheaths. A Hunger Moon washed them all in silver, and owls hooted in the cemetery across the street.

Ivy was snorting a line of Stygian salts off Jack's forearm, her nostril pinched shut by the sharp black nail of her index finger. Jack held his arm steady, a smile playing on his lips. His eyes were heavy with the kind of affection that made Loren feel like she shouldn't be watching.

"Besides," Dallas called over her shoulder to Darien as she got out of the car, flip-flops snapping against her heels. "You said yourself that you agree it'll feel less like an ambush this way."

Darien got out, followed by Max and Tanner. Doors slammed as they closed in unison, and spells rippled over the car.

The leader of the Devils had eyes only for Loren when he spoke. "I shouldn't have said anything." He looked everyone over, and he must've decided that they were ready, because he nodded once and gestured to the house up ahead. "Let's go."

Loren stayed in the centre of their group as they made their way

down the sidewalk. Palm tree fronds and bits of garbage crunched under boots and shoes—and, in Dallas's case, sandals. It didn't take Loren long to realize her decision to stay in the middle of the group wasn't really her decision at all, but one the Devils were making, likely from Darien's instruction.

Dallas was walking ahead of her, Maximus at her side. Loren tried her best not to laugh when she heard Max whisper, "Could you have worn louder shoes?"

The witch replied, "These are technically sandals, Max."

"If you have to run, you're going to trip and die. You know that, right? I'll never understand that type of footwear in a city like this."

They always bickered. It reminded Loren of herself and Darien. In fact, when she glanced up at Darien, who was walking at her left, she saw that his cheek was tilted upward with a smile.

"Remind you of someone?" Darien murmured. His attention was on the House of Souls, the silhouette of the old structure appearing quickly out of the gloom.

"I didn't know you could read my mind."

"We're on the same frequency now, baby." The trace of humor in his words faded as he added, "Your heart is skipping." When those intense eyes settled on hers, it skipped for an entirely different reason.

"I'm a little nervous."

His fingers closed around her wrist, thumb brushing across her racing pulse. He raised her hand to his mouth to press a kiss to the back of it. "As long as you are with me, I will always protect you. Bodyguard, remember?"

She drew a deep breath. "I remember." She wished she could say the same to him. If anything ever happened to him, and she was unable to help, she would never forgive herself.

He gave her hand a light squeeze before letting go.

And then they were in front of the wrought-iron gates, and it was too late to worry anymore.

A lithe figure was walking the flagstone path that cut through the lawn, the heels on her ankle boots clacking hollowly. Mahogany hair fell to her shoulders in a cut that was blunt and angled, the color bringing out the dusting of freckles on her paper-white skin.

"You guys owe me big time for this," Aspen Van Halen hissed. She swung open the gates, wincing as the hinges squealed. She pointed a long-nailed finger at Darien. "And if I get excommunicated, you're taking me in and switching your name to the Eight Devils. Got it?"

The shadows of the bars on the gate passed across Darien's face as he offered her a teasing smile. "Come on now, Asp. You know I would never let that happen."

With a grin, Aspen stepped to the side to allow them through. "He

does care,” she declared.

Darien placed a hand on the small of Loren’s back, ushering her forward. “I meant I would never change our name to the Eight Devils,” he clarified. “That sounds fucking ridiculous.”

Aspen wound up and punched him in the shoulder.

He rubbed the spot where she’d hit, a deep laugh slipping through his lips. “You’ve been working on that right hook.”

The Reaper gave him a cheeky smile before her attention went to Lace. “Lacey.” She dipped her chin in greeting. “Good to see you.”

“Likewise,” Lace replied. Her platinum hair glowed as brightly as the bulbs on the cast-iron streetlamps.

“I wonder if we’ll ever get more than a few weeks in before we’re banned from being friends again.”

Lace’s red-painted mouth quirked. “I wonder.”

When Aspen caught Loren looking at her, she gave her a discreet wink. Memories of the Devil’s Advocate flooded her mind, making her blush cherry-red, just as she had back then.

Aspen’s bob swung as she gestured toward the house with a canting of her head. “Get inside. Hurry.”

Dallas was the last to walk through the gates, and as soon as she took the first step, Loren swore everyone cringed at the snap of her flip-flops against her heels. “What about the spells?” Her red hair blew in a breeze as she glanced at Tanner in search of the answer.

“Aspen was kind enough to give me the day off,” Tanner replied.

Ivy raised her arched brows at Aspen. “Maybe Malakai should promote you to hacker.”

“I’d be good at it,” Aspen said with a smile. “I had to break into Malakai’s computer and program you guys to be allowed in. And let me tell you, it was *not* easy.” She pinned Darien with a wide-eyed stare and pointed a finger at him. “Which is *exactly* why you’ll take pity on me and offer me your home if I get kicked out. Right?”

Darien began down the flagstone path, his attention on the front doors. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

Everyone followed his lead, Loren hurrying to catch up with him. Aspen came up on her other side, her boots making far less noise now that she was walking on grass instead of flagstones. The Reaper was drawing shallow breaths, a sign that her fears of being kicked out of her circle were as real as the ground beneath their feet.

Darien said, “Where’s Malakai?”

“The last I heard, he was in his suite.” Aspen grimaced.

Darien threw her a curious glance. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.” She walked up the front steps and pushed open the door. “But at least he’s far too occupied to see you coming.”

Everyone fell silent as they walked, one by one, into the House of

Souls. Warm air that smelled of vanilla, leather, and a hint of tobacco wrapped around them, the fragrance tickling Loren's nose. As soon as they were all in the entrance hall, they paired up and followed Aspen down a narrow corridor lined with oil paintings, the colors bleached with age. Loren stuck close to Darien, the sleeve of her cardigan brushing the back of his hand.

The architecture was old but beautiful. Wall sconces made of intricate metalwork and amber glass lit their path, bathing the interior of the house in mellow golden light. Vintage wallpaper with a cobalt damask pattern made the place look and feel even darker than it already was. Straight ahead was a huge lounge room with antique sofas and armchairs, a tall grandfather clock ticking in a corner. An eight-light brass chandelier with etched glass shades hung above the collection of furniture. There was a bat Familiar with a long arrowhead tail sleeping upside down from an arm of that chandelier, its leathery wings draped around its body. With its face entirely hidden, it was hardly more than a small black cocoon.

Two men were sitting in the armchairs closest to a fireplace of ink-black bricks, sipping what looked like whiskey from crystal glasses. While one had golden eyes, ivory skin, and dirty-blond hair that fell to his shoulders, the other was the opposite. His black hair was softly curling, his skin a stunning shade of brown that brought out the hue of his eyes—such a light blue, they almost had no color at all.

It didn't take the two Reapers long to notice the group. As soon as they caught sight of them, they shot to their feet, the blond replacing his whiskey with a blade, while the dark-haired one drew a gun from the holster concealed at the front of his gray jeans.

"Cool it!" Aspen snapped, hands flying up. "I don't want any bloodshed tonight."

"What the hell is this, Asp?" The dark-haired Reaper waved a gun at their group.

Maximus was standing at Loren's other side, fencing her in with Darien, she realized. He seemed to be suppressing a smile as he assessed the man brandishing the gun. "You look better than the last time I saw you, Sylvan. You get a nose job or something?"

"Go screw yourself, Maximus."

The blond one bit out a husky laugh. "Wait until Malakai gets a load of this." A sharp whistle cut between his teeth.

A dark shadow separated itself from his and hurtled past the group, leaving nothing but a trail of dark mist in its wake. It was moving far too quickly for Loren to tell what kind of animal it was.

Aspen's expression was a mixture of worry and discontent as she stared after the Familiar. "You never give me a chance to explain anything, Valen."

“You’re breaking the most important rule: no Devils allowed in here. You ever been excommunicated before? It fucking sucks.”

Darien stepped up to Aspen’s side. “I see you haven’t changed at all, Valen,” he said icily. “Still quick to judge, and even quicker to rat out the people who are supposed to be your family.”

Valen’s eyes blazed. “If she was family, she wouldn’t let enemies walk through our front door.”

“We’re not your enemies, but your boss has clearly convinced you otherwise. It doesn’t really surprise me; brainwashing always has worked best on weak-minded people.”

Valen smirked, using his blade to clean his nails. “As soon as he gives me the okay to cut out your tongue, you and I have got a date.”

“I wouldn’t hold out hope if I were you,” Darien said. “I’d be willing to bet everything I own that he lets us walk out of here in one piece.”

The one with the frosty eyes—Sylvan—smiled coldly and crossed his beefy arms. “After you killed our men? You’re not going anywhere, Darien.” When his gaze flicked to Loren, she saw a mixture of emotions there, but it was mostly curiosity and disdain. “I see you brought another peace offering. That’ll do you no good, Malakai’s got enough pussy in this house.”

Darien clenched his jaw. “I’m starting to see why you’re still single, Sylvan.”

Sylvan narrowed his glacial eyes. “You want to go, Cassel?” He made to lunge for Darien, but he stopped when Valen grabbed him by an arm, neither of them missing the fact that Jack and Travis were now flanking Darien, hands hovering near their weapons.

Darien said coolly, “Tell you what. If things don’t go the way I’m hoping they will, we can square up outside, just you and me. How does that sound?”

“Like music to my ears.”

Bare feet slapped on hard floors as someone approached.

The two Reapers shared a hyena-like grin. “This’ll be good,” Valen murmured.

The group turned to see where the rapid footsteps were coming from. Loren did the same, feeling like she was stuck in slow motion, her actions always delayed when compared with the others’.

When she caught sight of the man storming down the hallway—and the twin male Reapers emerging from the gloom of narrow corridors, both of them huge as hell—she found herself drifting to Darien’s side. Trotting just in front of the man was a lynx with glowing spots on its shadowy back—the Familiar that Valen had called out of his shadow.

Loren wasn’t sure what she was expecting Malakai Delaney to look

like, but it wasn't this.

His wavy hair was reddish in color and shoulder-length, his beard full and sculpted. One side of his face was covered in faded blue tattoos that looked like symbols of some sort. Ancient Reunerian, she decided. His eyes, bright like emeralds, held a similar intensity to Darien's, the kind that could burn you to a crisp if he looked at you for too long. He wasn't wearing a shirt, only gray sweatpants that were slung low, the lack of clothing revealing that he had a ton of scars and ink, his body impressively muscled. Two beautiful women were trailing him down the corridor, blankets engulfing their bodies, but they abruptly turned around as soon as they saw what was going on—and who was here.

"Is that him?" Loren whispered.

"He's hot," Dallas hissed in her ear. "In that rugged man-who-lives-in-the-mountains sort of way."

Loren looked at the Reaper again as he charged into the room, his eyes fixated on Darien. "He looks..." She swallowed. "Angry."

"*You motherfucker!*" Malakai spat the words. He was heading straight for Darien, pushing past anyone in his path.

Darien said, "He *is* angry."

Before Loren could make sense of what was happening, Darien was shoving her out of the way, the force behind the action causing her to slam into Dallas.

Malakai had attacked. He'd already landed several hits on Darien before Darien managed to hit the Reaper back. They were moving so quickly that her human eyes could barely track the fight. People were shouting. Glasses and ornaments were shattering on the floor. Reapers were holding Devils back, and vice versa, as the leaders of both circles whaled on each other.

Blood sprayed. Clothing tore. Fists thudded on flesh. Furniture was knocked over and thrown into the fireplace, wood splinters showering the ornamental rug.

Loren hadn't seen Darien fight very often, but she knew enough about his abilities that she could tell this was unusual for him. Malakai was his match, and the more hits they exchanged, the sicker Loren felt. Her head spun as she realized she didn't know which of them would win—or what it would take for them to stop.

Malakai dealt another rapid blow to Darien's face, the ring on his middle finger splitting Darien's brow open. Blood misted the air, and Darien barked out a curse word. As Malakai lunged for him, Darien reared back and then forward again with blinding speed, smashing his forehead against the Reaper's. Bone crunched and more blood sprayed, and Loren wasn't sure whose it was.

She was moving before she fully realized what she was doing.

While everybody was busy holding each other back from intervening, no one had thought anything of the human in the group.

Loren stepped between Darien and Malakai just as the latter was winding back his fist to deal out another blow—an uppercut that Darien would've taken straight to the mouth, an attack he was bracing for with slightly bent knees, fists rising to intercept it.

Malakai's scarred knuckles drew closer in a flash. Loren stumbled back against Darien's chest, whose sharp intake of breath was audible, even amid all the commotion.

And then Darien's hand shot out, catching Malakai's fist half a second before it could connect with her face. Darien's hand was so close to her that she could feel the heat from his skin, could see every detail on his steel rings. The devil faces wore wicked grins, drops of crimson gleaming like tiny rubies on teeth and horns.

Malakai was gaping at her, his bloody fist frozen in Darien's grip. No one else in the room was talking or moving, let alone breathing.

The antique clock in the corner ticked loudly.

"I don't want to have to kill you," Darien said around tense, panting breaths, "but I will if you don't back the fuck up."

The clock ticked even louder. Darien did not let go of Malakai's fist as the Reaper studied Loren.

She held his stare. No matter how badly she wanted to break it, she held, her breathing steady and quiet.

"Out of the way," Malakai snarled. There was blood staining his teeth, and she saw that his canines were filed into sharp points that were coated in silver.

Loren lifted her chin. "I'm not moving. If you want him, you'll have to get through me, and I don't think you want to find out what will happen if you hit me."

Another second passed. A second that seemed like an hour.

Malakai tore his hand out of Darien's grip at the same time that Darien shoved his fist away. The leader of the Reapers was still looking at Loren, the rage that had marred his features a moment ago now replaced with curiosity.

"Sweet fucking tits, you hit hard," Malakai told Darien.

"So do you."

"Now I see why you wear those rings." He swiped his thumb over the bridge of his nose, the skin torn up by the horns on one of the rings. And then the Reaper's attention went back to her. "You've got balls, girl," Malakai said. "I'll give you that."

"I don't need your approval," Loren replied sweetly. "But I *am* going to need for you to never touch him again."

An unwilling smile ghosted across Malakai's mouth. "She's a feisty one. Where'd you find her?"



"It's a long story." Darien stepped up to Loren's side. Loren didn't miss that he angled himself in a way that put his body between her and Malakai. "But if you're done throwing hands, maybe we can get some talking in." Malakai opened his mouth to speak, but Darien continued, "And since I know you're going to ask, I want you to know that the deaths of Tyson and Liam were an accident. We were shot at outside of Blackbird, and I acted in self-defense."

"Did you know it was them?"

"Not until I'd already pulled the trigger. I knew it was Tyson, but I didn't recognize Liam."

"*Bullshit*," Malakai spat.

"It's the truth," Darien pressed. "I would never kill a member of another house on purpose, Malakai. You know that. Do you honestly think I would go out of my way to kill them after I just brought you a peace offering?"

Malakai thought it through. The atmosphere in the room shifted, and Loren sensed the tension leaving, thank the Scarlet Star.

"You said *we*," Malakai began. His intense green eyes flicked to Loren again. "Was she—"

"Involved? Yes. I wasn't about to stand by and let her get killed. I think you can understand that." A pause. And then Darien amended in a softer tone, "I *hope* you can understand that."

Silence swelled again, broken only by the crackling of the fire in the hearth and the ticking of the noisy clock.

"If you call that an apology, I'll accept it," Malakai said. "But I stand by my former rule: you're not allowed in here again. If you set one foot on my property, you are trespassing, and your blood is my fair game. Now, if you're done, you can leave." He began to walk away.

Darien called after him, "Although I admit I owe you an apology, that's not why I came here."

Malakai stopped. He turned, brow furrowing. He was still catching his breath, the beads of sweat and blood on his chest shining in the light of the chandelier.

The shadow of small bat wings fell across the floor as the Familiar hanging from the chandelier woke up with a big stretch.

"I have a business proposition for you," Darien said.

"I'm listening," Malakai prompted. "But I'm warning you now, my patience is wearing thin."

"I have insider information that suggests the new Head Detective of the MPU wants to take down all the circles in the city."

"Who told you this?"

"Detective Finn Solace."

"Why the hell would a detective give you that information?"

“Because they want our help. If I help them clean up the streets of the slave dealers, they won’t come after us, but to do that, I need to take Randal’s position.”

The frown Malakai was wearing suggested exactly how unimpressed he was by the idea of helping Darien claim his place as new leader of Angelthene’s Darkslayers. “And where do I fit into this? If you’re planning on using me to secure your seat—”

“I want you as my Right Hand.” The title of Right Hand had belonged to Lionel Savage before, the slayer who’d assisted Randal Slade and was paid handsomely for his time.

The other Reapers in the room shifted on their feet. Glances were thrown about, but no one spoke.

Malakai looked as confused as he likely felt. “What—”

“Listen, please,” Darien said. “You and your Reapers will get a pay raise, and once I’ve dealt with the weapons dealers, cleared our names from the MPU’s blacklist, and cleaned up a few problems of my own, you can have my position as Head of all Houses. I want out of Darkslaying.”

Loren’s mouth popped open. She was aware of the tension rippling through the room, the kind that suggested Darien might not have filled his Devils in on this decision. He hadn’t spoken to her about it either, but in that moment, she felt her heart bursting with hope.

Was he telling the truth? If it was a lie, he was fooling everyone, including her.

She stared up at him, mind spinning. He kept his focus on the Reaper, likely building up a wall to block out the different emotions he could feel from the many auras in the room.

“You want out?” Malakai demanded, voicing the question she was sure was spinning through everyone’s mind at that second. “Since when? What for?” His eyes flicked to Loren, and understanding smoothed his expression. “Ah, for some sweet pussy.”

Darien’s next words lashed out like a whip. “Don’t you talk about her like that.”

“It’s okay,” Loren cut in, her tone teasing. “Besides, he isn’t exactly wrong. Is he, Darien?”

Malakai barked a laugh. “I like this one. She can take a joke.”

Although Darien still looked pissed off by Malakai’s comment, he let it slide, raising a brow in question. “So, what do you say?”

Malakai thought it through. He looked at his Reapers, then up at the chandelier—and the bat hanging from it. “It’s no secret that I don’t trust you, so I’m a little reluctant to believe all of this.”

“We used to be friends, Malakai. You were the one who threw that out the window, remember? And for what? Some childish jealousy? You let Randal’s power rankings drive us apart.” The intensity on his

face thawed. “*You* did that, Malakai. Not me.”

Silence swept in again, and so did the ticking of that noisy clock.

Finally, Malakai held up a scarred finger. “If I find out you’re playing me—”

“You don’t need to worry about that because I’m not. I’m not playing you, I swear on my life.” Loren felt Darien’s attention fall upon her as he added, “I swear on *her* life.”

A rosy feeling washed through her. She understood that his words were a declaration, one that confirmed Darien could be trusted. He’d walked in here with her by his side, allowing Malakai to see exactly where he would need to hit him to do the most damage, should Darien decide to double-cross him. And she knew it was killing him to do it—the fact that he’d tried for nearly an hour to convince her to stay at Hell’s Gate was evidence of that—but it was what they needed right now to seal the deal he was making with the Reapers.

Loren stared at Darien, and he stared back. For a minute, everything and everyone melted away, leaving the two of them floating in their own private bubble.

When Malakai spoke again, his voice held no animosity. “I can feel it. What you have with her.”

Darien didn’t answer. Another beat passed as he looked at her, and then his eyes flicked over her shoulder. “Did you renovate the bar?”

Loren turned to see what he was looking at. The bar was entirely black, same with the liquor cabinets and leather barstools. Black skulls and crystal ornaments decorated the onyx countertop. Even the sink was matte-black.

Malakai said, “Last summer.”

“If you’re open for a discussion, I wouldn’t mind a drink.”

That made the Reaper grin. “Oh, I bet you wouldn’t.”

The sound of the front door swinging open with a bang halted all conversation.

“MalakaaAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!” a female voice wailed. An upset one, by the sound of it.

When Valen spoke, there was genuine concern in his words. “Oh no.” He shared a weighted look with Sylvan.

A set of swift boots pounded on the floor, and a moment later, a girl with moon-white skin and lilac hair swung around the corner, pale hands in tight fists. She wore an outfit of all-black leather—a mini skirt, a crop top, and combat boots with a chunky heel. Her big eyes, lined in dark kohl, scanned the room until they zeroed in on the leader of the Reapers.

“What the *hell* did you say to him?” Her top lip—colored with black lipstick—curled back over her teeth.

Malakai managed to look convincing as he said, “Who?”

"My date, you ignoramus!"

"Ah, *him*." His face smoothed with feigned understanding. "A few words of warning, as I do all the guys who take you out."

With a baring of straight teeth, she held up an index finger. "That is going to stop right this instant. Do you hear me?"

Malakai made the mistake of laughing. He looked at Valen and Sylvan, who laughed as well, and soon the twin males were joining in. Loren remembered their names were Brodie and Macen Verlice. She'd never seen them before, but like most of the Darkslayers, she'd heard of them. They were brown-skinned and brawny, with dark hair cropped close to their heads.

"This isn't funny, you buffoon!" the girl fumed. "I don't have much time left, and I need my fill of good dick. Got it?" That made several of the guys in the room—a few of them Devils—snicker.

Loren wondered what the girl meant by not having much time left.

"If it's a worthy dick, you can have all you want of it," Malakai said. "But so far, you've only brought a bunch of tools home, and none of them are very sharp."

"That's a lame joke. And who are you to decide who I date?"

"I'm your brother, Jewelry Bean. I get a say in who my little sister dates, wouldn't you agree?"

"If Dad was here—"

Malakai crossed his arms and leaned forward, bringing his head down to her level. "He would be doing the exact same thing, Jewels! Don't pull that shit with me."

It was Travis who said, "If she needs a dick appointment, I'm available. My first opening is in one hour."

Jewels swung her head around to glare at him, hair catching in her mouth. "I'm sorry, *who* are you?"

"Travis Devlin." His brow creased. "We've met like twice already."

"Yeah, I don't remember any *Travis Devlin*, so I think it's obvious that you're not my type."

Malakai choked on a laugh, and when Loren peeked up at Darien, she saw that he was trying not to laugh too.

Travis visibly bristled. Clearly, he didn't get rejected often. "You're not my type either, Jewels."

Jewels ignored him and gave Malakai a look of defeat. She threw her hands up, and when they fell back down, they slapped her shapely thighs. "Well, this has been fun, but I'm going to my room. No one bother me—there's not a single dick in this room that's worth my time."

Several of the guys said, "Ouch."

Jewels merely turned and walked away without a backward glance.

Valen faced Malakai. "Sometimes I wonder how you handle her."

Malakai was staring blankly at the now-empty corridor where his sister had vanished. "I try to be understanding with everything going on, but I can't help it when it comes to asshole males."

Brodie Verlice—the twin with a scar that cut through his right eyebrow—said, "It makes you wonder what they want with a clock that's running out of batteries."

Malakai's focus zeroed in on Brodie. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." He sighed. "But you're also right. Which is exactly why I watch her closely." His attention went to Darien, who looked as confused as Loren felt. "Let me get into some proper clothes and get the blood off of me. Then we can talk about this plan of yours."

"Good," Darien said. "I'm tired of looking at your pierced nipples."

The grin that flashed across Malakai's face was wide, the silver of his canines glinting. Bare feet slapped as he made for the corridor. "If you touch anything on my bar, you can forget about our deal."

"What about the whiskey?" Darien called.

Malakai's next words boomed off the walls. "Not a thing, or you can walk your smart ass out of here."

Darien chuckled quietly, several people in the room echoing it.

The remaining Reapers immediately separated themselves from the Devils. They went to the grouping of furniture near the fireplace, clearly unwilling to trust them or even mingle just yet.

Aspen slumped against one of the barstools, looking pale but also relieved. "That went better than I thought it would."

Tanner and Maximus murmured their agreements.

Darien said, "I don't know how many times it's going to take before you guys trust me."

"It's not you," Tanner said. "It's psychopaths like Delaney."

Ivy chimed in. "Agreed."

Darien acknowledged them with a grunt. And then he was turning to Aspen. "How's that whole crushing on Malakai thing going?"

Loren perked up at the question. She never would've guessed that Aspen had a thing for Malakai, but then again, she hadn't been around her long enough to get a feel for her.

Aspen shifted on her feet, the legs of the barstool she was leaning against thumping on the floor. "I think you got your answer earlier."

"If you told him how you felt, I'm sure he'd stop."

Lace pointed and said, "That is *exactly* what I told her!"

Aspen waved them away. "*Please*. As if I'm going to risk losing my home, my circle, *and* one of my best friends."

"Asp." Darien's tone was reproachful.

Her eyes flashed. "Dare-fucking-devil, get your nosy ass out of my business already. I don't need you playing matchmaker."

Jack tried to grab one of the crystal skulls off the bar, but Ivy smacked his hand away. "Ouch," Jack hissed. But then he was grinning. "Darien thinks he's an expert in relationships ever since he finally—"

"Don't say it," Darien warned.

"—decided to keep one of the girls he brought home," Jack finished with a snicker, slapping his own thigh with amusement.

Max was shaking his head. "Jeez, Jacky. Do you *want* to get excommunicated? Because it kinda seems like it."

"Nah, I just like pissing him off." He beamed at Darien, all of his teeth showing. "Am I good at it?"

"Ivy's slackened your leash too much, you little shit."

Ivy made a gesture that looked like she was pulling on an invisible rope. "Tightening it up as we speak," she crooned.

Jack was still smiling. "I'll take that as a resounding yes."

"Get the hell out of my face," Darien snarled.

"Gone, baby!" He gave a lazy wave and made for the front door with his head down.

Malakai came around the corner in jeans and a white t-shirt, his hair tied back in a low knot, the blood scrubbed off his face. "Alright, now that I'm not half-naked and covered in blood. How about that drink?"

—

"So, what do you think?" Malakai set down his glass with a wet thump.

Where he was seated at the bar between Malakai and Max, Loren balanced on his knee, Darien tossed back the dregs of his whiskey. The liquid burned his throat on the way down and made his body feel buoyant, which was just what he needed after tonight. His face was throbbing. If he could see himself in a mirror right now, he knew he would look just as awful as Malakai. "Wargs first," he decided, setting down his glass. "Huntsmen second."

"Or both," Max offered, "if we get lucky."

Malakai shook his head. "We'll never catch them in the same place, they hate each other's guts. Almost as much as I hate this guy's guts." He punched Darien in the shoulder—hard enough to cause the muscle to throb in pain.

Darien shot him an icy glare that made the tear in his right eyebrow sting. "You just hit me way harder than you needed to."

"Because Blondie got in the way before I could get my winning hit in." He winked.

"Winning?" Darien scoffed. "I was barely getting started."

Loren cleared her throat. "My name's not Blondie, it's Loren." A shiver of delight dripped down Darien's spine as she ran her fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face. Those nails of hers dug into his skin in the best way, the sensation reminding him of when she clawed his back while they were fucking. "If you get to call me Blondie, then I get to call you Tattoo Face."

Malakai wheezed a laugh. "I like her. If you ever get sick of him, you know where to come, if you catch my drift." If Loren didn't catch it, then Darien sure as hell did, and he envisioned punching it down Malakai's throat. Judging from the way she stiffened slightly in his lap, he figured she'd understood perfectly well.

"If we're going to work together, I have a couple rules," Darien said, tightening his grip on Loren's waist. His words weren't just for Malakai, but also the other Reapers who were lounging in the sitting room behind them. "Rule number one: no keeping secrets. We tell each other everything. Rule number two: no filthy jokes about my girl. Got it?"

Malakai waved him away. "You were more fun when you were single." He stood, collected the glasses, and brought them to the sink.

Malakai's Familiar swept down from the shadows above the cupboards to perch on his shoulder. Creature was his name—a bat with an arrowhead tail, whose wingbeats kicked up black sparkly clouds everywhere he went. He got along well with Bandit, considering Bandit usually preferred to eat any living thing that was smaller than him.

Bandit stirred in Darien's shadow. *Can you blame me? Small things are pesky, and they usually taste good.*

*You're hilarious.* He paused, glancing at his shadow that was slanted across the floor. *Wait a minute, are you referring to Mortifer?*

Bandit started humming to himself.

Malakai turned the tap on. "Get the hell out of here, I'm sick of looking at you guys."

Darien gave Loren's thigh a prompting pat. She slid off him and stepped away so he could stand. Aside from Jack, all the other Devils, along with Dallas, were seated near the fireplace with the same Reapers as before, and they rose when they saw him glance their way.

"Meet us at Channary's this Saturday," Darien told Malakai. "Six o'clock." Lacing his fingers with Loren's, he added, "Sharp, Mal."

Malakai mimicked him in a squeaky voice, "'Sharp, Mal.'"

"Fuck, you're annoying."

Malakai flipped him off. "I'll be there at seven o'clock sharp."

"You mean six o'clock."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Regaining Malakai's favor was a task he could now cross off his

list. It wasn't the biggest obstacle he would have to tackle, not by any means, but at least it was something.

As soon as he came to an agreement with Channary, he would be able to breathe easier. Malakai was dangerous, it was true, but he had a good head on his shoulders, and he was easier to reason with.

Channary and Lionel were the opposite. While Malakai had once been one of Darien's best friends, Channary and Lionel had always fit strictly into the enemies category. They would be a hard sell, and even if they agreed to work with him, he would never be able to let his guard down and fully trust them.

After what happened with Calanthe, and how easily she'd fooled them all with nothing but a bit of Nacht Essentia, he would take no chances. Looking around at his friends as they made their way out of the House of Souls, he realized he had a lot to lose, and he was unwilling to part with any of it. The choices he made from here on out would be tied to everyone who was important to him.

He refused to fuck it up.



Precisely twenty-three minutes had passed since they'd left the House of Souls, and Loren was still struggling to breathe. Twenty-three minutes, and Darien hadn't said a word. Not to her, not to anyone.

The longer the silence dragged on, the quicker Loren's heart pounded. The way she had to resort to watching him in the rear-view mirror from where she sat in the back seat, his eyes never once meeting hers in the glass, reminded her of their visit to Stone's End. She'd pissed him off that night—badly. And now she feared she had done it again.

She knew she had made a mistake—that much was a given. Getting in the middle of a fight that had nothing to do with her had been a huge mistake. Darien had taken a chance by allowing her to go with him to the House of Souls, and she'd wrecked it by interfering. She could feel it.

The golden lights of Hell's Gate shone in the distance as they drove through the Victoria Amazonica District, sprawling mansions with winding driveways passing by in blurs. The neighborhood was sleepy and peaceful, the windows in most of the houses dark.

A couple minutes later, the car slowed to a crawl, wrought-iron gates swinging open.

Darien turned onto the driveway, gravel popping under the tires. He stopped in his usual spot out front, put the car in park, and dimmed the headlights. Seatbelts unbuckled, and doors swung open as the others got out, leaving her alone with Darien in the car. Dallas threw her a backward glance before taking Max's outstretched hand and continuing up to the front steps.

Loren waited until the others were inside before she undid her seatbelt, the snap of the buckle severing the silence. Darien's face betrayed nothing as he cut the engine and grabbed his phone and keys.

She got out, shut her door, and made her way to the front steps. The night was hushed, the sound of Darien's door swinging open slicing through the still yard. She was all too aware of the Devil walking just behind her, that brooding male presence she'd felt nearly every day since last fall looming at her back.

As soon as they got through the front door, Darien removed his jacket and shirt, both of them too bloody from his fight with Malakai to continue wearing, and draped them on the railing of the staircase.

She could feel him watching her as he took a seat at the bottom of the stairs and undid the laces on his boots.

The silence between them weighed on her, heavy and thick. She wanted to break it, but she didn't know how, and she wondered if it might be better to wait for him to do it instead.

Loren wiggled her feet out of her shoes, not bothering to untie them, and crossed the entrance hall. As she walked past Darien, the space between them electrified with tension, those eyes tracking every movement she made.

When she spoke, she fiddled with the charms on her bracelet, the tiny shops and restaurants all made of rose gold. "Could you come upstairs with me, please?" Even she could hear the uncertainty in her breathy tone. She pulled herself up the stairs, hand grasping the smooth rail. After a moment, she heard Darien following behind her.

Her heart was skipping out an anxious beat she knew he would pick up on, even from several paces behind her. Nothing ever slipped past his careful attention. But she hurried up to his suite and into the bathroom, flicking on the lights as she moved. She found her tin of healing salve in one of the drawers, the label marked with a mortar and pestle.

He could get mad at her for interfering with his fight with Malakai after. First, she needed to take care of him.

Metal clinked as she twisted the lid off the tin. As she was setting the tin and lid on the countertop, she felt Darien enter the room. She could feel him everywhere, all the time, she didn't even have to look to know he was there. No matter where they were, no matter who they were with, his presence never failed to affect her.

"Loren." That voice was low. Gentle, not cold. The tone was the opposite of what she expected to hear, but she still wasn't ready to face whatever he wanted to say.

She found a box of gauze pads in the drawer and took out a short stack, pinching them between her thumb and index finger. She separated one from the others and dampened it with water from the tap. "Would you please sit on the edge of the bathtub?" she said, not turning.

There was a pause, and then Darien did as she'd asked.

Quiet filled the room as she stepped up to him. He spread his legs to allow her to get closer, and then she began her work, using the gauze pad to clean the cuts on his jaw, his nose, and the skin below and above his left eye. Thanks to Darien's hellseher genes, most of the wounds were already healing, but there were a couple that were deeper than the rest, and these were the ones she focused on.

Darien watched her intently, his eyes never once leaving her face. She was nearly finished when he broke the silence, his deep, rich

voice filling the whole room.

"You're barely touching me, baby." The quiet words echoed faintly.

"I'm almost done," she whispered.

She turned around to grab the tin of healing salve from the countertop. As she stepped back up to him, balancing the open tin in her palm, he shut his eyes, freeing her from that piercing stare, and held very still. Carefully, she dabbed a bit of the product to his brow and the bridge of his nose—the two deepest wounds on his face, the ones that were taking the longest to heal.

Once she was finished with the salve, the lid back on the tin, she was out of things to occupy herself with.

There was no point in delaying any longer. She placed the tin on the edge of the bathtub and waited.

When he opened his eyes to look up at her, she looked away. She stared at the glossy floor, her teeth worrying her lower lip. "You probably want to talk," she began. "About what happened at the House of Souls."

"You're afraid I'm angry with you," Darien accused. "Aren't you?"

"Why wouldn't you be?" She forced herself to make eye contact with him. "I stepped between you and Malakai. I got involved when I shouldn't have. You have every right to be angry with me."

"You're right," he agreed. "I do."

She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. "I—"

He got to his feet, the sudden proximity sending her drifting back a pace. He towered over her, that familiar tension crackling between them, his bare upper body so close to her that every breath she drew nearly caused her breasts to brush up against him.

Slowly, he reached out, his hand closing around her chin. He tilted her face up, but she kept her focus pointing downward, lashes fanning out above her cheeks. "Look at me," he commanded.

She did. That hand was exceptionally gentle, and his eyes—

Those eyes were sparking, but not with anger. They were sparking with need. Desire. The unexpected reaction struck her dumb.

"You could've been hurt," Darien said, "you know that?"

With his hand still grasping her chin, she barely managed to nod.

"Tell me why you did it," he said, keeping his intense eyes locked with hers. "Why'd you get between us?"

"Because I couldn't bear to see you in pain." Her words were a wobbly whisper. "And because..." Tears pricked her eyes, the moisture blurring her vision. "Because I love you."

There was a moment of quiet before he said her name. "Loren."

She looked up at him again, not realizing until now that she had looked away.

"I *am* mad," he began. When she tried to duck her head, he held

firm, dipping his own low enough to draw her gaze. "But not at you. I'm mad that you almost got hurt, but you did it because you love me." His rough thumb swept across her mouth, briefly tugging on her bottom lip. He tracked the motion with a heated gaze that turned her legs to jelly before his focus swept back up to her eyes. "And I can't be angry at that."

He released her then, both hands moving to grasp the backs of her thighs. He hoisted her up and wrapped her legs around his waist.

She was so taken aback by the turn of this conversation that her top half pitched forward, and she nearly smacked her face against his. But she caught herself against his chest right on time, arms circling his neck.

"I need you to understand something," he began. "We're going to fight. We're going to disagree. We're going to give each other the silent treatment." A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, showing off his dimple, as he amended, "*You're* going to give me the silent treatment."

"I will not," she argued.

"Yes, you will." His hands shifted to cup her backside. "Who is Loren Calla if she doesn't give her man the silent treatment?" Amusement twinkled in his gaze. But then he turned serious, those eyes blazing with intensity instead of humor. "But I want it, Loren. I want all of it. Everything that you have to offer—every fight, every disagreement, I want it all." He kissed the corner of her mouth, the contact sparking a fire deep inside her. "And even if I *was* angry with you tonight for the reasons you thought, I wouldn't have held it against you. But—" He went silent then, the shift so abrupt that her heart skipped a beat.

She traced the shape of his lips with her index finger. "But what?"

A new smile played on his mouth. "I *am* pretty angry," he admitted. "Just not at you." Those hands squeezed her ass. "And I could really use something right now. Something to take my anger out on." He was covering her mouth with his before she had a chance to speak.

The kiss was rough. Desperate. Her hands went to his hair, fingers threading through the silken strands. He groaned into her mouth, his tongue claiming hers. She could feel his erection pressing between her thighs, and she wanted it, wanted him buried inside her more than she wanted to breathe.

But he broke the kiss and set her on her feet. "Arms up." He nipped at her bottom lip.

She did as she was told, and he took off her shirt and cardigan and threw them on the floor. He pulled her close, his chest grazing hers, as his hand went to the clasp on her bra. She was breathing heavily, her

breasts rising against him with every lungful. The clasp loosened with a deft flick of his fingers, and he slipped her bra off, admiring the sight of her standing topless before him.

And then he was lowering himself to a crouch before her, his hands drifting to the buttons on her jeans.

Loren held her breath as he undid the buttons and zipper. Slowly, he tugged her jeans down, leaving her thong on. When a lock of his hair shifted to fall in his face, the tip of it grazing the bare skin of her thigh, her heart stumbled. A kaleidoscope of butterflies swarmed her stomach, wings catching fire from the flame growing inside her.

As he shimmied her pants down past her knees, he pressed a kiss to the pulse between her legs. Through the pearl lace of her underwear, the brush of his mouth was excruciatingly light, but he still succeeded at making her squirm.

Especially when he looked up at her, those cavernous eyes swallowed up by a deep black that somehow managed to be both intimidating and sexy at the same time.

He stood and gestured to the bathtub behind him. "Sit."

She shuffled over to the tub, feeling a bit silly with her pants down by her ankles. But the look on Darien's face as he shadowed her, stepping aside so she could sit, told her he didn't think she looked silly at all.

As soon as she was sitting, the edge of the tub icy cold under her bare ass, he crouched before her again. He tugged her jeans off her ankles, leaving her in nothing but her socks and underwear.

He dragged his hand down her left leg, past her knee, where his fingers stopped to circle her ankle. His thumb slipped under the edge of her sock, knuckle scraping the arch of her foot. He tugged it off, looking up at her the whole time, those eyes blue again instead of coal-black. He lifted her foot and pressed a kiss to the inside of her ankle, breath warming her skin, before moving onto the right.

"Do you have a thing for feet?" The question was out before she could stop it.

He laughed softly, the rich sound sending tingles all the way from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. "No. But I have a thing for you." He tugged the second sock off and threw it aside. His hands found hers, and he stood, pulling her to her feet with him. "I'm obsessed with every part of you." He trailed a hand down the valley between her breasts...down her stomach...past her belly button. Every muscle in her body tightened with anticipation as that hand slipped lower. He paused right above her pussy, the warmth from his hand—and his close proximity to that ultra sensitive area—making her squirm where she stood, thighs instinctively squeezing together. "Especially this." The words were husky, and they dripped with lust.

And then that hand was snaking under the string of her panties. He pulled them down to her knees, every scrape of the fabric electrifying her skin, and then let them fall to her ankles. She was stepping out of them just as he grabbed her around the back of the neck and kissed her hard on the mouth, his tongue spreading her lips.

By the time he broke that kiss, her core was tight with need. Her heart slammed in her chest, every beat shaking through her body.

"Take this off," he demanded, his index finger nudging the fine gold chain that held the Avertera talisman. He gestured to the stone shower beside the bathtub. "Get in the shower."

He didn't have to tell her twice.

As she pulled open the glass door and got inside, undoing the clasp of her necklace as she moved, Darien crossed the bathroom and dimmed the lights to a mellow glow.

The shower was spacious, the enclosure scented with the bundles of fresh silver-dollar eucalyptus that were draped above the showerheads, blue-green leaves dripping down like fat drops of rain.

She placed her necklace on the shelf of toiletries and turned both of the showerheads on, adjusting the water to hot. As steam began to cloud the bathroom, streams of warm water jetting out and soaking her body, she turned to watch Darien through the glass.

He was watching her too as he strode back over, and she felt her stomach flipflop as his hands moved to undo his belt buckle.

Heat crept into her cheeks, but she did not remove her gaze, hands held out before her in the streams of water, as he slid his pants and boxers down his hips, every downward shift of his clothing revealing tantalizing glimpses of solid muscle.

Every time they did this, it felt like their very first time. The butterflies were still there. Her heart still skipped beats. The nerves in her stomach still became a tight knot that wouldn't relent until long after they were joined.

Her eyes swept across the firm muscles in his broad chest, down his heavily tattooed arms, then down to the grooves in his abs. Scars flecked nearly every inch of his body that wasn't covered in ink, but in the dim lighting they were barely visible, his skin a rich golden color from spending over twenty-four years under Angelthene's bright sun.

"I need you to promise me something," Darien said as he got in the shower, shutting the door behind him. The closer he got, the more aware she became of him, the quicker the rest of the world melted away, leaving only the two of them. There was no room for anything else—just him. Him and her.

"Anything." Her voice was breathy.

The last of the oxygen in the room went away as he stepped closer. "I want you to promise," he began, crowding her to the farthest wall

of the shower, “that you’ll always talk to me when something’s wrong.”

“I will,” she whispered. Her back met the wall, and her feet stilled. He flattened his hands against the stone on either side of her head and bent to kiss the edge of her jaw. They were close now, the hard peaks of her nipples rubbing against his chest, the warmth of his impressive erection pressing up against her stomach.

When she dared to look down, her mouth dried out, and her heart stumbled at least two beats. Maybe even three.

He passed his mouth over hers, the grazing of his lips making her shiver. “I need you to say it.”

“I promise.”

He dipped his hand between her thighs, fingers going straight to that area that would betray how badly she wanted him. “This is mine.” His voice was very deep, and when he looked up at her from under dark eyelashes, she saw that his eyes were solid black again, his expression feral.

When he pushed two fingers inside her, she stood on her tiptoes, fingertips digging into the wall at her back. He didn’t look away from her as he buried them in her heat, right up to the knuckles, the movement causing her ass to pillow against the wall. The sensation of his fingers rubbing inside her made her gasp, the soft sound carrying through the shower that suddenly didn’t feel as spacious as it had before.

And then he pressed a kiss to the skin right above her thundering heart. “And this?” he murmured. He looked up at her as his hand began to move, fingers dipping in and out, that area as slick as the shower walls. Strands of black hair hung in his face, moisture dripping off the ends.

“Yours.” She shuddered under his touch, her reaction causing his cock to twitch against her stomach.

“Do you want me to fuck this little pussy?”

Gods yes. But words escaped her as that wicked hand continued to move between her legs. A whimper rose in her throat, and she bit her lower lip. Somehow, she managed to nod.

He slid his fingers out of her, the sudden absence of his touch agonizing. He grabbed her by the thighs, hands wrapping nearly all the way around them, and lifted her up. “You liked it when I fucked you against this wall the other day,” he breathed, hooking her legs around his waist. “Didn’t you?” He dipped his head to her level, that mouth brushing across hers again, touching but not kissing. “Didn’t you?”

She wet her lips, legs tightening around his waist. “Yes.”

He lifted her up a little, one hand supporting her backside, while

the other dipped between their bodies. He bent his knees and positioned his cock at her entrance.

And then he pushed himself inside her. Several inches at first, the intrusion causing her to shudder from anticipation. Anticipation—and a little bit of pain as her body adjusted to his size.

It was the pain he watched for—the pain that made him retreat, sliding nearly right out to the tip.

Her fingers fisted his hair, stopping him before he could pull out of her entirely. “Don’t you dare.”

A sinful smile ghosted across his lips. Again, he eased back into her, a little further this time. He didn’t take his eyes off her—not once.

“You okay?” he breathed.

She swallowed. “Yes.”

He drew back out. And then, slowly, he pushed himself back in, all the way to the thick base. She winced a little as he stretched her, filling her right up, not a hint of space between them.

“Sweetheart.” It was a question, and it echoed softly. When she looked up at him through the clouds of steam swirling around them, she saw that his eyes were blazing with need, yet gentle with affection.

“Keep going.” Her tone was as desperate as she felt. “I’m fine.”

She was fine. It was like this every time, the size of him in comparison to her causing them to move at a slow pace until she adjusted. But she loved it, loved how her body felt when he was deep inside her. She never stopped wanting it, never stopped wanting him.

One last time, he slid back out, lifting her body up with the movement, fingers digging into her thighs.

And then he plunged back into her. In and in and in. A groan slipped through his lips, mingling with a cry of her own, as he pushed himself in deep, burying himself in her until he couldn’t fit any more. She watched him as his eyes briefly shut with pleasure.

“Fuck.” His voice was dark. Rough as gravel. “You feel so good, sweetheart. Too fucking good.”

And then he gripped her hips with those big hands and began. At first, his movements were slow and careful, like they always were. Days had passed—weeks since their first time. But he hadn’t stopped treating her like this, hadn’t stopped being careful with her.

Time bled away as he fucked her against that wall, every motion slow and gentle. As they moved as one, his hands caressed her body. The way he touched her felt like worship and possession, as if he was asserting his claim on her. Their breathing sped up to the same rapid pace, and soon their bodies were moving quicker too.

Loren could feel nothing but Darien as he thrust into her, every movement now hard and deep. His fingers dug into her skin as he



rolled his hips against hers, the angle he chose causing his pelvis to grind into her clit, the feeling doubled by the wall at her back, the firm and unyielding surface deepening every brutal thrust he dealt to her body. She clung to him, fingernails digging into his back. His muscles shifted under her grip as he pounded into her, the both of them sprinting toward the same end, pleasure sparking between them.

"You like that?" Darien's voice was husky, his face so close to hers that his breath fanned her mouth, hot as the steam.

"Yes." The one word was a gasp. The word he loved to hear her say, especially when they were tangled up in each other like this.

"Good girl." His movements sped up. Deepened. Every thrust turned desperate. Greedy.

She slipped against the shower wall, but his hold on her didn't falter.

"I've got you," he said.

She pressed her face into his chest, holding on as pleasure tightened every muscle in her body, her insides squeezing him snug, her lower back digging into the stone. Her pulse thundered everywhere, his own beating just as strong under her cheek.

"Don't stop," she begged. She would drown herself in this moment—would willingly drown herself in him.

His hand found her hair, pulling her head back as he covered her mouth with his. When he broke the kiss, he stayed close, lips still grazing hers. "Fuck, Loren." He pounded into her, every movement brutal, her ass slapping against the stone. "*Fuck.*"

Together, they went, their climax finding them at the same time as he drove himself home with one last thrust, his cock slamming into that sweet spot way, way inside her, a dart of heat arrowing up into her belly as he found his release. She cried out, toes curling in the air, her thighs squeezing his waist.

Darien shook against her, his hands gripping her thighs hard, her name floating off his lips in a low snarl as he continued to fuck her, not slowing down.

With his hips still thrusting into her, a second wave of pleasure crested, so soon after the first that the two blended together.

Darien watched her the whole time as her orgasm worked its way through her, her body quivering with pleasure. "Good fucking girl," he breathed, grinding into her hard, every movement precise and quick.

Until, finally, she went limp, her head falling forward against his chest. He fully supported her weight, the muscles in his arms trembling faintly, not from exhaustion, she knew, but from release.

For a long time, he held her as she clung to him, water jetting around them. Her cheek was stuck to his chest, and her hands fluttered where they clutched his shoulders. She could feel his heart

pounding, every steady thump vibrating through her own chest. He kept one hand under her ass, supporting her weight, the other hand buried in her hair at the back of her head.

And then that hand tightened. Gently, he tugged her head back so he could look at her face. Her sweaty face, the temperature of the water turning her skin rosy.

“What are you looking at?” she croaked. She was out of breath.

“You,” he panted. “Am I not allowed to look at you?”

She squirmed, causing his cock that was still stiff inside her to twitch.

He swore from the feeling, hand tightening on her waist to still her movements.

Loren shrugged in answer to his question. “I can’t help but wonder what you’re thinking when you do it,” she said.

“I’m always thinking the same thing.” Carefully, he moved a strand of hair that was clinging to her cheek with sweat and water aside. “You’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.” He kissed her forehead and mumbled against her skin, “And I’m the luckiest man alive.”

“You must be getting tired of me by now.”

“I’d be the biggest idiot in the world if I ever got tired of you.” He pulled out of her then, the sudden movement causing her to wince. He set her on her feet, water splashing, but kept his hands on her hips, holding her until he was convinced she had found her balance, she knew. His attention snagged on the cum that was running down the insides of her thighs. “Fuck, that’s sexy,” he growled, thumb rubbing a line through it. “I could never get tired of this either.”

If her face wasn’t already rosy from the heat and the sex, she would’ve blushed.

Darien nudged her into the stream of water. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

—

“You know I can walk on my own, right?” Loren asked as Darien carried her out of the bathroom. She was wearing her pajamas, and as for himself, he had pulled on a pair of gray pants that were breathable and didn’t irritate him when he slept.

“Your legs are buzzing,” he replied.

“That’s your fault, you know.”

He grinned down at her. “Are you mad?”

Pink dusted her cheeks. “No.” The generous curve of her rosy lips fluttered with a shy smile. The sight of it weakened his knees and made his heart freak out in a way only Loren Elizabeth Calla could make it freak out.

He put her down on the bed and laid down beside her, pulling the quilt and sheets up. Loren shifted closer and nestled her head into the crook of his shoulder. Once she was comfortable, she placed her hand over his heart and closed her eyes.

In the minutes afterward, the only sound to break the silence was their breathing. His heart had that slow, steady beat that followed climax, and so did hers. He listened to it like it was a lullaby written just for him, one he had the honor of falling asleep to every night.

Eyes shut, Darien murmured, "You're a terrible influence, you know that?" He opened one eye to peek at her.

"Me?" Loren tsked, scrunching her nose up at him. As soon as her eyes opened, they closed again. She yawned widely, the stud in her tongue winking in the enchanted candlelight. "You're the one doing all the corrupting, Mister Darkslayer."

"Think you'll be able to walk tomorrow?"

"I highly doubt it."

"Good. That means I did my job right." He kissed her on the top of her head, a tender brushing of his lips that had the outer corners of her eyes tipping up with a smile, even as she yawned again.

"Are you still angry?" She was so tired, the words melded into a garbled murmur.

"Of course not. I'm over it. Especially after that."

A moment of quiet, and then she said, "Darn."

He peered down at her, but her eyes were still shut. "Why?"

"Because if this is what you being angry looks like," she slurred, "then I'm going to want more of it."

Darien chuckled. "You are the cutest thing." By the time he had finished speaking, she had drifted off, her breathing quiet.

In the silence of their suite, Darien watched Loren sleep. A weight pulled on his heart, and there was a burning sensation behind his eyes that he barely recognized, he'd felt it so seldomly.

He threaded his fingers through hers, the heat from her hand seeping into his.

Until she'd come along, he hadn't dared to dream, and had rarely ever prayed. And until she'd come along, and he'd fallen hopelessly in love with her, he hadn't realized she was not only a dream come true, but a desperate prayer he hadn't realized he'd made being answered.

As he drifted off beside her, his hand still grasping hers, he said one last prayer, a quiet and short one. He prayed that *this* right here—this girl, this blessing—would last forever. He knew he would never deserve her, not in a million years. But he was selfish enough to want her forever.

Always and forever. No matter what.

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Something was tickling her skin. The area just below her right ear, to be precise. The feeling drew her out of a soundless sleep, and as it continued, she began to dream of spiders. Thousands of spiders crawling all over her, climbing up through her hair to nestle deep inside her ears—

With a wild gasp, she jolted up, hand poised to slap her neck.

A different hand—warm and firm and larger than hers—closed gently around her wrist.

“Shh,” Darien whispered. “Hold still, or you’ll wreck it.”

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she lowered herself back onto the bed and rested her head on the pillow. Utterly confused, she waited for Darien to finish what he was doing, resisting the urge to flinch or laugh or kick her feet as his fingers tickled her skin. The more awake she felt, the more aware she became, and she realized there was something stuck to her neck. It was stiff like cardboard and slightly damp.

“Did you lick me?” she whispered, the question thick with sleep. The light from the enchanted candles played on the walls, making shadows dance across the vaulted ceiling.

Darien chuckled. “No. But I can if you want me to.” He carefully peeled something off her neck and sat back. The big smile that spread across his face deepened the dimple in his cheek and made his steel eyes sparkle with joy, a look that was so innocent, it made her insides go all fuzzy. “There. Have a look.”

Still groggy with sleep, she slowly pushed herself up onto her knees and looked in the giant mirror beside the bed.

There was a horned letter S below her ear. Exactly like the one Darien and the other Devils wore. If she didn’t know any better, she would think it was the real thing.

“Do you like it?” The way he was smiling at her in the reflection was the most adorable thing she had ever seen.

An answering grin spread across her face. “I love it.” Tucking loose strands of hair behind her ear, she hovered her fingertips over the tattoo, being careful not to touch it. “Where did you get this?”

“Kyle made it.”

“He does press-on tattoos?”

“He does now.” He came up behind her on the bed and pushed her hair to one shoulder, fingertips trailing across her nape. The sensation sent a rush of heat down her spine. Lowering his mouth to her neck, he murmured against her skin, “I had to bully him a little bit.”

Loren shivered at the feel of his mouth. “That’s not very nice.” Her thighs inched together, heat pulsing between them. Weeks had passed,

and she still hadn't stopped wanting him, not even when her whole body ached from the things he did to her in the hushed hours of the night.

And the hours he stole during daylight, too.

Darien's breath tickled her skin as he whispered, "I'm not a nice person, baby."

"That's only what you *want* people to believe." She felt him smile against her neck. "Did he make you more than one?"

"Yes. But you'll never guess where I put them."

Loren's eyes flicked to the nightstand. "They're in that top drawer, aren't they?"

"Shh."

Loren laughed. "I still can't have a real one?"

That adorable smile of his shifted into a frown. "Not tonight. Or any night, if I can help it." He kissed the side of her neck, his breath raising a new prickle on her skin.

She turned her head to look at him, her stare accusing. He was so close, she could see every shade of blue in his eyes, every eyelash. "You really don't want to change your name to the Eight Devils, do you?"

He smiled. "Definitely not." He grabbed her by the chin and locked his lips with hers. The passion behind the kiss made her heart and stomach flutter to the same song. When he pulled away, he stayed close, his lips grazing hers. "You're better than that anyway, Loren. Better than Devils. Better than...than me." Another kiss swallowed the words she was trying to say.

When she managed to break the kiss, she panted, "Why would you say that? I am *not* too good for you."

He smiled. "No?"

"No!"

"I love it when you get angry with me."

Planting a hand between her shoulder blades, he pushed her onto her stomach, and she fell to the mattress with an "Oof!"

He bent over her, his hair tickling the small of her back. He moved lower...and lower...

She was about to ask him what he was doing when he yanked her pajama shorts down with one firm tug. And then—

And then she felt his teeth dig into her ass cheek.

Loren gasped in shock. "You just bit me!" she exclaimed, turning her head to glare at him.

Darien smiled up at her. "Did you like it?"

The question made her squirm, the hair that hung in her face swaying like a curtain of light. "I didn't mind it," she admitted quietly.

"I've wanted to do that since that night in the dining room." The

memory he spoke of warmed her whole body. Especially when Darien added, his voice a low rumble, "Told you everything is enjoyable if I'm the one doing it."

And then Darien was raising her hips up slightly, one of his hands under her stomach. He pushed her knees apart with one of his own, opening her up to him, keeping her breasts flat against the bed. She felt fully exposed but very turned on as he drank in the sight of her with a hungry gaze. The way his tongue glided across his upper lip was very distracting, and it made the pulse between her legs turn into a throbbing need, the force of it impossible to ignore.

As if he could read her thoughts, Darien crooned, "Someone's needy tonight." His hand went to the band of her shorts, the material nearly tearing as he pulled them down to her ankles. She wasn't wearing any underwear, but if she was, she was certain they would've ripped. He'd wrecked several pairs already.

She held her breath as his hand dipped between her thighs. He began by circling her clit, his pressure excruciatingly light.

"Can you blame me?" she asked him, the words coming out as breathless as she felt. He watched her face the whole time as he continued to touch her, his hand teasing her entrance.

She got desperate quickly, her hips moving in small rotations that coaxed his fingers closer to where she wanted them. But he wouldn't give it to her, his fingers teasing the entrance just enough to drive her wild.

His other hand spanked her ass hard enough to sting, making her suck in a gasp. When Darien spoke, his voice was a growl. "You have the most perfect ass." He bent over her and brushed his mouth across the stinging skin. As he did it, she found herself wishing that he would bite her again. He certainly wasn't lying when he'd said that everything was enjoyable if he was the one doing it. "Did I ever tell you that?"

"Only every day," she teased.

"Are you giving me attitude?"

She fidgeted. "Maybe."

Another spank had her drawing a hiss in through her teeth.

But she liked it. And she wanted him to do it again.

Darien's heated stare locked on her. "You like that," he accused, his voice dripping with lust. "Don't you?"

"No," she lied, baiting him.

"What did I say about that word?" The lie worked, because his fingers slid between her legs again, feeling the wetness there that would give her away—the wetness that disclosed exactly how much she loved it when he spanked her. "If you don't like it, then what's this right here?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're such a little liar."

When his fingers returned to her entrance, the tip of his middle finger slipping just inside, her hips started rotating again. "Please," she bit out.

"Please what?"

"I need you inside me."

"Say it, then."

"Fuck me, Darien. Please."

"That's my good girl." He pushed two fingers inside her. The area was sensitive to his touch, but she groaned all the same, not the least bit surprised that she needed him again so soon. That mouth of his pulled up into a crooked smile. "Sore?"

"A little," she admitted.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No!"

A dark laugh slipped through his lips.

But then he *did* stop, pulling his fingers out of her far too soon.

"Darien!" she protested, the hair that was still partially damp from their shower catching in her eyelashes as she turned to look at him.

When she saw that he was removing his pants, she shut her damn mouth.

The tip of him nudged her entrance, the heat from his cock seeping into her skin. She pushed her ass back into him just as he was sliding into her with one swift movement, right to his base, stretching her so good that she gasped. Gasped and then moaned, a sound that by all rights should've embarrassed her.

But she didn't care anymore because Darien was fucking her then, filling her so deeply with every hard thrust that a new promise of ecstasy shimmered on that delicious horizon.

Her face was already as flushed as it could get, and hair stuck to her forehead. Supported by the strong hands gripping her waist, she felt her body turn boneless, her limbs trembling as he thrustured into her, every movement rough. She turned her head to watch him, loving the sight of his hands gripping her ass, the muscles in his arms tensing and flexing, the ink on his skin pronounced in the candlelight. He tilted her hips, the angle causing him to grind an ultra sensitive spot deep inside her.

A sigh of pleasure slipped through her lips.

"Oh, I like that one," he breathed, that husky voice dripping with approval. He fisted her hair, winding it around his right hand, while the other gripped her waist as he pounded into her.

"Like what?" she asked.

"That little squeak." His strokes came faster, driving the last of the

air out of her lungs with another muffled cry. "That one, too."

"They're embarrassing," she managed to say.

"They're sexy." His lips brushed her shoulder. "You have no idea what you do to me. How you affect me." He kissed the top of her head, his ragged breaths warming her hair. "I'm obsessed with you."

She quivered as that hand left her hair, instead dipping between her legs, exploring the taut area where their bodies were joined. Another of those squeaks was pushed out of her with a hard thrust that hurt in the best possible way, and her eyelids slid shut.

His hand found her hair again, and he turned her head in the sheets so she was looking in the mirror. "Look how beautiful you are." His eyes met hers in the glass. "I like it when you watch." He was watching her, too. He didn't take his eyes off her—not for one second.

Never mind her. *He* was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and ever would see. His body was a work of art, the sweat that was running through the grooves of his muscles glistening like paint on a flawless sculpture. Every movement he made felt so good that she found herself pushing her ass against him, fucking him back, eager to meet every blow he dealt her. Maybe she was biased, but the sight of their bodies moving in tandem in the glass was extraordinary. They complimented each other perfectly, like night and day.

The more she pushed back against him, her ass slapping his front, the more ragged his breathing became, the faster and more urgent his movements. He was coming undone, just as she was coming undone. They would go together, just the way she liked it.

He pinned her upper half to the bed with a large hand between her shoulder blades, her breasts flattening against the mattress, her ass in the air as it slapped against him.

"*Fuck.*" The word he uttered was a deep snarl that made her toes curl in the sheets.

A rush of heat shot deep into her belly, the feeling of his release pushing her over her own finish line, his hand gripping the sheets in a tight fist. A strangled cry slipped out of her, a sound that was soon met with one of Darien's own as they dissolved together into a shuddering orgasm, his cock throbbing so deep inside her as he came that it was as if their bodies were one and the same.

By the time his movements stilled, the sprinkling of stars in her vision fading away, she was out of breath and trembling. If it weren't for Darien's hands gripping her waist, she thought she might've collapsed.

And when he pulled out of her, and she began to push herself up into a sitting position, she *did* collapse.

Even though the mattress would've cushioned her fall, Darien caught her before she could hit the bed. He was holding her up, one



hand supporting her chest, the other wrapped around her waist. Her knees were shaking, and there was a high-pitched ringing in her ears.

"Are you okay?" Darien's voice sounded far away. "Lola, sweetheart, can you hear me?"

The question echoed. *Lola, sweetheart, can you hear me?*

*Sweetheart, can you hear me?*

*Can you hear me?*

*Hear me?*

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she came to. She was lying on the bed, her head cushioned by her pillow. When Darien spoke again, she realized only a few seconds had passed, or several minutes at the most.

"Don't move for a minute," he instructed, his words thick with concern. She could hardly see him through her blurry vision, but she gathered enough to realize he was putting his pants on, every movement urgent. "I'm going to open the windows."

"Darien," she croaked.

"Don't move."

When he came back to the bed, gusts of night-cool air sweeping in through the window screens, he reached for her, taking her left arm into his careful hands. The tattoo of the serpent-entwined rod was glaring red and pulsing, the light gilding his strong jaw. It reflected in his eyelashes and hair, streaking the black strands with crimson.

He let her arm go as quickly as he'd grabbed onto it. Through bleary eyes, she watched him stalk over to the dresser, where he grabbed the first shirt he could find and pulled it on. When he came back to the bed, bare feet slapping the floors, he helped her up to a sitting position and tugged her shorts back up her legs.

She felt ridiculous, not to mention useless. "I can do it." She waved him away and finished putting them on herself, fixing the rumples in the waistband.

As soon as she was done, his arms were around her, and he was hoisting her up and hooking her legs around his waist as if she weighed no more than a doll.

Despite how useless she'd felt a moment ago, she didn't fight him, and she found her head lolling against his shoulder, exhaustion winning over her pride. "What are we doing?" she mumbled into his shirt as he crossed the room. The soft fabric smelled like that mouth-watering cologne he always wore, along with the scent of *him*—just him, something she couldn't describe but loved with her whole heart. She breathed it in deeply, every lungful greedy.

By the time he replied, they were already in the hallway. "We're going downstairs."

Darien didn't say anything more as he carried her down the

hallway, flicking lights on as he walked. He descended the staircase swiftly, holding his arms so steadily that she barely felt the impact of his feet striking the steps.

“Darien, I’m okay,” she croaked. Dammit, her voice just *had* to sound like that, didn’t it? “Really. You’re panicking.”

“I don’t think I can be blamed for it,” he said, glancing down at her, his eyes incredibly soft, “when it’s you we’re talking about.”

Even though she was still spaced out and breathless, she felt blood rush to her cheeks. The way he was looking at her, the meaning behind his words...

She didn’t deserve him.

The lights were on in the kitchen. Jack was seated at the island, munching from a bowl of popcorn, his barstool turned toward the sitting room as he watched an action movie on the television.

Jack didn’t pull his attention from the screen as he declared, “You guys reek of sex.”

Darien set her on a barstool two places down from where Jack was sitting. His hand hovered in the air behind her, preparing to catch her if she fell. A full minute must’ve passed before he decided she was steady enough for his liking, and rounded the island.

When he got to the sink, flicking the tap on full to wash his hands, he asked Jack, “Why are you still up?” He pumped soap into his palms and scrubbed.

Jack shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Quickly, Darien rinsed his hands and dried them. And then he went to the cupboards and started digging around, doors opening and slamming shut as he searched for whatever it was that he needed.

“What’re you looking for?” Jack mumbled around a mouthful of popcorn, the sound of his chewing mixing with Mortifer’s. The Hob was watching the movie as well, though he sat in his usual spot on the fridge, snacking on chips of ice.

“Are there no clean dishes in this house?” Darien said.

“They’re clean.” Jack pointed at the dishwasher. “In there.”

Darien shook his head in disappointment, but he started unloading the dishwasher. “What would you like to eat, Loren?”

“I’m okay, Darien, really. I’m feeling much better.” She made to stand. “Let me help—”

He abruptly stopped and pointed a finger at her. “You sit your cute ass back down right this instant.”

Loren was hovering above her seat. She knew she shouldn’t do it, but she raised a taunting brow, a smile threatening to form on her lips.

“Sit.”

“Fine. Mister Bossy Pants over here.” But she slumped back down.

"I will always be bossy when your health is the concern. You *need* to eat, sweetheart," Darien said firmly as he continued unloading the dishwasher, eyes intense as they flicked up to meet hers. The look on his face brooked no contestation. "What would you like?"

Before she could speak, Jack cut in, his focus still on his movie. "If you could grill me a cheese sandwich, that'd be great, thanks."

Darien paused, spatula in hand. "What?"

"Grill me a cheese sandwich, Dad Darien. Thanks."

"Call me Dad Darien one more time, and you're getting a wallop with this spatula." He paused, spatula held before him, and then he added, "And you can grill your own sandwich." His attention returned to Loren. "What can I make for you?"

"Actually...a grilled cheese doesn't sound so bad."

"Baby, no!" Darien gasped, waving the spatula in Jack's direction. "Don't encourage him!"

Jack dissolved into a fit of hysterical laughter. "This is great!" He clapped his hands. "I knew I was going to like having her around. We'll both have one, thanks. I like mine extra crispy."

Darien looked at Loren, his expression desperate.

She merely shrugged, fighting a smile.

"Fine." He pointed the spatula at Jack. "But you're cleaning the kitchen after. And don't argue with me, or I'll cancel your allowance."

"Deal." He shoveled another handful of popcorn into his mouth, not bothering to shut it as he chewed.

"Thanks, Daddy," Loren teased.

Darien's smile grew, and she was glad to see it. He *was* worrying too much. She was fine.

In fact, after a few minutes, she felt well enough to get up and walk to the fridge. Although Darien was pretending to be absorbed with cooking at the stove, she could feel him stealing glances at her as she opened the door of the fridge and shuffled through the contents on the shelves, the air cooling her cheeks. Finally, she found the jar she was looking for and pulled it out, nearly knocking over a pitcher of iced tea.

Tossing the hair out of her face, she straightened and gripped the lid of the dill pickles.

Darien was watching her with faint amusement as he flattened one of the sandwiches with the spatula.

"I like a pickle with my grilled cheese," she explained. Gripping the lid harder, she twisted, but it wouldn't budge. With a sigh, she stepped up to Darien and offered him the jar. "Here you go, muscles."

Instead of taking the jar from her, he merely gripped the lid and twisted it off with ease, his face darkening with concern.

"What is it?" she asked. "Do you want a pickle?"

“You should’ve been able to open that on your own.” There was nothing rude in the statement, only concern.

She plucked a pickle out of the jar and sucked on it, salt puckering her tongue. “Guess I should start lifting weights then.”

“The lid was half-shut, Loren.”

“I must’ve loosened it for you.”

The frown on his face deepened. “Loren.”

“Mmm?” She bit off the end of the pickle.

He flipped the sandwiches, barely looking at what he was doing. “Are you sure you’re okay? Should I be worried?”

“I’m fine, Darien. I promise.” She offered him a bite of the pickle, and he took one only to appease her, his attention still on her face. “This has been going on for a lot longer than you’ve seen. I’m okay. Trust me.” She squinted up at him. “*Do you trust me?*”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Good. Then stop fussing. You have bigger things to worry about than my fights with a pickle jar.” Taking the lid from him, she put it back on and placed the jar back in the fridge. Pretending she couldn’t feel Darien staring at her, she walked back to her seat.

Darien continued to watch her. He was always watching if she was in the same room as him, no matter what he was doing or who they were with. Usually, it had her bursting with happiness, but tonight it only made her feel seen, and not in a good way.

Because regardless of what she’d just told him, this *was* unusual for her. But she didn’t want him to worry; he had enough to worry about.

Turning in her seat to pretend to watch the movie with Jack, she tried to stop herself from remembering the words the Widow had said to her that day she’d walked into her den. But no matter how hard she tried, the words—the warning—still managed to sneak in.

*Use your magic and you will die, Liliana Sophronia.*

“Hold still,” Dallas scolded, gripping a fistful of Max’s hair hard enough to make his eyes tear up.

“I *am* holding still,” he grumbled. But even as he said it, he shifted on the bed, mattress sinking under his weight. “I feel like we’re in beauty school and I’m a goddamn mannequin.”

“A mannequin would be much easier to handle than you. You fidget and complain like a two-year-old. A mannequin would be doing none of that.” She snatched up the glass bottle from the nightstand in his suite and pumped more cream-colored liquid onto her middle finger. *Liquid foundation*, she called it.

The product was so cold, it made him flinch as she dabbed more beneath his ear. Although his hands were drumming his knees, and his shoes were tapping on the hardwood floors, he kept his head very still when he spoke, murmuring through a half-open mouth. “How long is this going to take?”

It was Sunday, and the sun was already setting, deep orange rays streaming through the gray curtains. Time had escaped them in their hurry to get ready for the event.

“As long as I need to cover your look-at-me-the-wrong-way-and-I’ll-kill-you tattoo.” At least she didn’t need to cover up the many other tattoos on his neck, or they’d be here all night.

“Can’t you use a glamour?”

Dallas snorted. “You flatter me that you actually think my glammers can last that long.”

Max studied her flawless makeup—the ruby shade of her lips, the coral powder swept across her sharp cheekbones, the dark tangle of her lashes that made her green eyes pop. “You glamour yourself all the time.”

“Yeah, and I’m going to need every bit of my magic to stop my face from becoming ugly halfway through dinner.”

Max frowned up at her. “You’re never ugly, Dallas.”

“Says the guy who’s never seen the troll without makeup or a glamour.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.” It was true. The way she looked tonight...she would be the hottest woman at the Fleet event, that was for certain. Even without the glamour.

“Would you quit mumbling?” Fisting his hair again, she wrenched his head back, making him grind his teeth. “And for the last bloody

time, hold still.”

“I thought I was the one who did the hair-pulling in this relationship.”

“You also thought you were the one who was going to wear the pants in this relationship, and look at us now.”

He did his best to hold still, staring up at Dallas as his eyes continued to water, her fist holding his hair in a death-grip.

She growled in frustration and threw her hands in the air, releasing him for one glorious moment. “I keep messing it up!”

“It’s because your hands are too sweaty,” he accused, fixing his white button-up shirt. It kept getting ruffled from all her fussing. If she didn’t watch it, it would soon be covered in makeup, and he would have to change. Which would suck because he didn’t have a large selection of clothes that could be deemed appropriate for a Fleet event. “What are you so nervous about? Everything’s going to be fine.”

“You clearly have not met my dad.” Turning on a spiked heel, she rifled through her makeup bag on the nightstand until she found a small black compact. Popping the lid open, she strutted back over to him and used a puffy white thing to dab some powder overtop of the liquid foundation, or whatever the shit that stuff was.

“I’m going to sneeze,” he warned, nose itching. Fine, dry particles floated through the air.

“Don’t, or I’ll break up with you.”

A laugh rumbled up his throat, but he managed to swallow it *and* the sneeze before Dallas could make good on her threat.

Finally, she stepped back to assess her work.

“Well?” Max prompted, blinking his burning eyes. Some of that powdery stuff felt like it was trapped under his eyelids.

A heavy sigh made her shoulders slump. “Good enough.”

With a sigh of his own that was more like a frustrated growl, Max heaved himself to his feet, bed creaking in relief. “Finally.”

He adjusted his belt buckle and tucked the loose folds of his shirt into his waistband as Dallas threw the makeup and brushes into her bag. She was wearing a short emerald-green dress that looked stunning against her copper hair. The long strands were curled softly, resting just shy of the small of her back, the area he liked to push on when he was slamming into her from behind.

Max shook the thought into the wind. “Dallas?” he called.

Flicking her hair over a freckled shoulder, she straightened, clutching a small purse in a tight grip. Nervous already, and the night had barely begun. “What?”

“You look beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re just saying that so I don’t subject you

to being a mannequin again.”

He grabbed his keys and wallet off the nightstand. “You’re right. I don’t hold still, everything is *not* going to be fine tonight, and I called you beautiful so you won’t subject me to being a mannequin again. Right, right, right.”

Dallas made a face. “Somebody’s grouchy.”

Shaking his sleeve back, he checked his watch. “And two somebodies are about to be late.” He made for the door, grabbing his suit jacket on the way out, the shoes he wore only when he was attending weddings and other fancy events tapping on the floor. “Let’s go.”

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The Fleet event to welcome Roark Bright back to the city was being held in the banquet hall of the Emerald Bay Resort.

The place was lavishly decorated, the building crowded with people wearing suits, elaborate gowns, and smiles that were likely as fake as their personalities. Jewelry winked under romantic lighting, and violinists played on a stage by the south wall. There were handcrafted ice sculptures and centerpieces, champagne towers, expensive-looking flowers, and so many balloons that Max wondered if there were any left in Angelthene, or if the event planner had bought out all the stock.

Max hated it. He’d never felt so out of place. One clumsy move on his part, and he’d take out an entire tower of champagne glasses.

No pressure or anything. But no matter how awkward he felt, he knew Dallas well enough to tell how hard this was for her. She was breathing shallowly, her silver-ringed eyes flicking about the room. He could see her pulse racing in her neck.

“I could use a drink right about now,” Dallas muttered. She stuck close to Max’s side, her arm brushing the sleeve of his shirt.

“That’s the last thing you need,” Max replied, keeping his voice at the same volume as hers. “What you need is a good, hard spanking.”

Dallas blinked several times, as if to clear her vision, but kept her attention ahead. “Anyplace other than here, and I’d be tearing your pants off, Max Reacher.”

Max tsked. “Allow me to clarify. You need a good, hard spanking for worrying so much. You’re driving me up the wall.”

Her catlike eyes flicked to his. “Sorry.”

“Everything will be fine, Dal. What are you so worried about?”

She froze then, as if she’d bumped into an invisible wall, fingers smoothing out the wrinkles in her satiny dress. “Him.” The word was a soft breath, her throat bobbing with a heavy swallow.

Max followed her gaze. About a dozen feet away, Roark Bright was surrounded by a tight group of adoring people—a bunch of fake asses who tipped their heads back and laughed every time he said something. Max would be willing to bet Roark couldn't make a joke if he tried. Max had seen the man in the Daystar paper countless times, but his resemblance to Dallas was more apparent in person. Same hair color, same skin color, same smile. Their eyes were different; while hers were silver-green, his were amber, but aside from this, there was no mistaking it: Dallas was his daughter.

Roark had once been a member of the Phoenix Head Society, way back when Erasmus Sophronia was young and human. Back when Roark went by the name Elix Danik. The silver rings around the man's pupils hinted at his warlock genetics, but there was hellseher in him too. There had to be. Which meant the gene alteration that had turned him into a hellseher had not passed onto Dallas.

But the man, like Erasmus Sophronia, had been born mortal, which was the reason the two had banded together to create the Arcanum Well.

So how in the hell did he have warlock blood?

The question was one of many that had invaded Max's mind since that night in the Bright penthouse. So many questions, they sometimes kept him up at night.

Max grabbed hold of the infuriating thoughts and pushed them to the very back of his mind, focusing instead on the here and now. "He's your dad," he said to Dallas. "The last person who should be worried about impressing him is his daughter. No?"

"I wish." The words were a choked whisper. "I've been trying to impress him ever since I was a little girl who discovered crayons." She swallowed again, her pupils dilating. "Ever since I showed him one of my masterpieces, and he told me I needed to color inside the lines."

Max snagged a flute of champagne off the tray of a passing server and tossed the liquid back. "Dick."

Dallas eyed him. "I'm going to need you to be civil tonight."

"Then maybe save the rest of your childhood memories for later, or he's going to find out how it feels to take a real punch to the face." His attention went back to Roark, the pompous ass everyone was doting on. What a hard life he must have, with servants at his beck and call.

While Darien was the fighter in the family, it was people like Roark that left Max burning up inside, his own fists itching with the need to pulverize something. The man had a wonderful daughter who bent over backwards to please him, but he'd been so sheltered and praised his whole life that he couldn't get off the high horse he rode in on and see what he'd been blessed with.

Dallas's quiet voice called him back to attention, and he loosened



his fist. "Oh, believe me, he found out a long time ago. He didn't get to where he is today without being dealt his fair share." A deep breath rattled her chest, the necklace she was wearing glimmering under the chandeliers. "Let's get this show on the road."

Max stayed close to Dallas as she led the way to the group, ditching his empty glass on the tray of another passing server. Dal was clutching her purse before her, her unblinking gaze on her father. The closer they got to the group, the more her feet dragged.

Laughter and conversation faded into a polite and curious silence as they joined the group.

Roark Bright's attention fell upon Dallas. "Ah, there she is," he said, plastering a perfect smile on his face. Gesturing with a graceful hand that showed off his rings and watch, he announced to the group, "Everyone, my daughter Dallas." He beckoned her forward, and she pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Best new recruit in Angelthene's Fleet."

One of the women in the group said with a grin, "Must be time for those wings soon."

"I've already arranged for it," Roark replied.

Shock swept across Dallas's face. "Really?"

"The seventh of Februarius."

The sight of Dallas working to compose the childlike excitement on her face didn't sit well with Max. That she felt the need to smother her emotions, to appear professional and composed, told him heaps about what her childhood must've been like.

The group clucked out another handful of introductions and empty exchanges that washed over Max like waves on a shore. He began to forget where he was, until Dallas backed up to his side.

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Maximus."

Max extended a hand to the Red Baron. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

Roark didn't accept the gesture. He merely dipped his chin, the movement subtle, barely enough effort behind it to be deemed polite. His virulent eyes flicked to the skin below Max's ear. "You've got a little something right here." He gestured to his own neck—spotlessly shaven and unmarked.

Max slipped his hands into his pockets. "We had to get a bit creative for tonight."

"And you think no one will recognize you?" The question sounded more like a threat.

He offered a tight smile. "Not many people have had the luxury of putting a face to the name, sir."

Roark glanced about the room, as if bored. "I bet not."

The rest of the group had floated away, pairing up with spouses or mingling with friends and acquaintances, leaving the three of them alone. The sudden absence of eyes picking them apart, and ears

listening in, had Roark's aura shifting, and not in a good way. Max didn't like the way he was assessing Dallas, not a trace of his former adoration present. In fact, the way he was looking at her could pass for a grimace.

"How's your schooling these days?" Roark asked her.

Dallas visibly swallowed, fingers twisting the fabric of her purse, as if she were wringing water from the sequins. "Good." When her voice came out in a croak, she cleared her throat quietly. "Good, Dad, really good. I am acing all of my classes."

Roark was frowning. "I heard you're not doing too well in incantations."

"I think she's doing just fine," Max cut in, just as Dallas said, "It was one test, Dad."

Roark didn't spare a glance for Max. His tone was icy as he told Dallas, "Don't let it happen again."

Max couldn't keep his mouth shut. "For someone who's expected to attend the most prestigious school in the city five days a week, and train with the Fleet for six, I'd say one failed test is pretty impressive."

"And I'd say you're overstepping," Roark said coolly, pinning him with a stern look. "Stand down. This isn't a Darkslayer house party, it's a Fleet event, and you are interfering in my family affairs."

"With all due respect, she's my family now too. At least I'm around more often than you."

Dallas's hand fluttered to his wrist. "Why don't we head to our seats? I think dinner is being served soon."

Max didn't look away from Roark, and the Red Baron didn't look away from him either as Dallas towed him away with a sweaty hand.

"Yes, Maximus," Roark said, the words empty of emotion. "Why don't you head to your seats?"

Max kept his free hand in his pocket, hiding the fact that he was forming a fist, the wounds in his knuckles splitting open from how hard he was squeezing. Dallas was still clutching his wrist, pulling him toward one of the round tables near the stage.

It was by the grace of the gods that no one else was seated at their table yet, giving Max time to breathe, time to compose himself before he did something he would regret—something that would no doubt cause Dallas to forget he existed.

The witch pulled out two chairs and tugged on his arm, gesturing for him to sit. "What is it about being civil that you didn't understand?" she hissed in his ear.

"He's an asshole, Dal." He threw himself onto the seat, the wooden legs nearly buckling under his weight.

She took the chair beside his and set her purse on her lap. "He's also my father, so I would appreciate if you wouldn't call him that."

“Just because he’s your blood doesn’t mean he deserves you. A toxic relationship is a toxic relationship, no matter who it involves.” After everything he’d put up with as a child, he knew this better than anyone.

“Your concern is sweet, Max. Really, it is. But I’m going to need you to back out of this one.”

Max couldn’t form words, so he grunted instead. There was wine on the table, thank the Star. He reached for it and poured himself a glass, filling it to the brim. Grasping the stem so hard he was surprised it didn’t snap, he drank the whole thing, not giving a rat’s ass when three witches glanced his way with matching frowns.

Dinner passed quickly, the food as bland as the attendants. The tables seated twelve each, and with Roark and Taega in their company, the other guests within the vicinity vying for their attention, Max didn’t need to say much. People eyed him with curiosity, but luckily no one seemed to recognize him. Everyone here was likely too wealthy and sheltered to have ever seen him before, and he was glad for it. Dallas was careful to keep any conversations that drifted their way centered around the Bright family and Angelthene’s Aerial Fleet, allowing him to sit in silence and not have to remember the fake backstory she’d made up for him on the way here. Something about an Aura Healer visiting from the oceanside community of Carmel farther up the coast... Or was it Glasslight? Shit, he couldn’t remember the details. Good thing he didn’t need to.

The high energy permeating the building had mellowed out by the time their dessert plates were being cleared away, the clink of dishes and the din of tipsy conversations filling the banquet hall.

Finally freed of idle chatter, not a single pair of eyes on them, Dallas slid her chair closer to his. The rosy heat from her aura had Max leaning her way, slinging an arm around the back of her chair. She rested her hand on his knee, squeezing it lightly.

He tensed when he felt that hand slide higher up his muscled thigh, the evocative gesture sending a drip of heat down his spine.

“Don’t,” he snapped quietly.

“Don’t what?”

“If you keep touching me like that, we’re going to have to find someplace to disappear.” He wouldn’t mind; he loved getting intimate with Dallas, always jumping at the opportunity to do so.

Another squeeze of that naughty hand had every muscle in his body hardening—and something else, too.

“Dallas,” he warned, snatching her wrist. He held her hand below the table, taking care not to draw unwanted attention. He managed to stop himself from getting a full-blown erection right in the nick of time, but it was a close one.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Dallas’s face was flushed from all the wine she’d tossed back.

“Anywhere other than in front of the Red Baron.” The asshole was still seated at their table, his wife at his right, which was precisely the reason why Max hadn’t pulled Dallas to her feet and whisked her away.

“Is it really because he’s the Red Baron?” she crooned, eyes hooded, dark lashes fluttering. “Or is it because he’s my dad?”

Max fidgeted. “Both.”

She snaked a finger along the buttons in his shirt. “I had no idea it was so easy to get under Maximus Reacher’s skin.”

“It usually isn’t. You’re the only one.”

A red shade that had nothing to do with the wine crept through her cheeks. “Let’s not get all mushy right now,” she said, ducking her head.

“You’re never willing to get mushy. Let that wall down, Dal.”

“I’ve spent too long building it.” The statement was nearly inaudible. When he opened his mouth to reply, desperate to get her to confide in him, she shushed him before he could get one word out. “I think they’re moving onto the speeches now.”

“Oh goodie,” he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Civil,” she hissed, straightening in her seat.

He nodded. “Civil.”

Being as discreet as possible, he tipped his head down and slanted his left wrist, eyeing the watch he was wearing. An hour of speeches and a bit more mingling, and they would be free to go.

Lacing his fingers with Dallas’s, he set their twined hands on his knee and pretended to listen to the speeches, all of which had praise to toss at Roark and Taega Bright. Max was still getting to know Dallas, still trying to breach the wall she insisted on keeping up twenty-four-seven, but there was something about the set of her jaw that told him she thought this place and the people in it were full of shit.

That made two of them.

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Max blew a stream of velvet smoke at the starry sky, using his Sight to study the forcefield bubbled over the city. He was sitting on a bench near the front doors of the Emerald Bay Resort, feeling grateful for the quiet and the solitude. With his Sight, he could see the ancient runes that made up the spells of the forcefield, a whole shitload of letters belonging to languages as old as time itself.

There were expensive spells over the resort that kept Darkslayers

from seeing the auras inside the building, completely concealed by dense layers of colors that reminded him of the inside of a kaleidoscope.

Once he'd had enough of the forcefield and the spells on the resort, the undulating symbols dizzying him, he blinked his Sight away and watched the revolving glass doors instead. The lights inside spilled out onto the pavement, making it sparkle with whatever material the people who'd built this place had used to give it that effect.

As he was watching, he saw Dallas sweep by on the other side of the doors, glancing about as she moved, looking very much like she had something to hide.

"Shit," Max muttered, butting out the cigar on the armrest of the bench. He didn't need to be a genius to figure out that whatever she was doing likely involved her father.

He got to his feet and breezed through the doors, mumbling under his breath at how slowly they spun. As soon as he was through, he took off down the corridor to his right.

Now that he was inside, he was able to read the auras in here, so it didn't take him long to find Dallas weaving through the many interconnected rooms in the resort, all of them unoccupied save the witch who was roaming where she shouldn't.

He kept watching her, picking up his speed, shoes thumping on the patterned carpet.

Eventually, she slowed to a stop at a corner near the entrance to a private meeting room, and he was able to catch up to her without breaking into a sprint and drawing attention to himself.

Blinking away his Sight, he watched Dallas with his regular vision as he moved down the corridor. She was pressed up against the wall just outside the meeting room, the doors barely open a crack.

"Dal," he said softly.

She spun, pressing a hand to her throat in surprise. When she regained composure, she held a finger to her lips.

He mouthed, "What are you doing?"

"People are going missing from the Fleet." She kept her voice low enough for only a hellseher to hear, the words barely audible. "One of them turned up dead three days ago."

"I didn't hear about that on the news."

"Because someone's got something to hide."

"Or," Max said sternly, working to keep his voice down, "it's the Red Baron's confidential business, and they don't want the public knowing about it. Which is why we should go before he catches us listening."

Dallas didn't move. "Don't you think that's weird? I mean, the people who fight for the Fleet are some of the toughest in the world.

How can they just be turning up dead like this?"

There was a prickling on the back of his neck that told him they shouldn't be doing this. "Dallas, we should really—"

A sharp female voice came from behind them. "Dallas."

Max spun around, Dallas whimpering a curse word when she beheld the woman standing several feet away, arms crossed.

Taega inclined her head toward the corridor at her back. "Let's take a walk." Her attention arrowed in on Max. "Alone."

Dallas pushed away from the wall, moving quietly, likely hoping her father and whoever was inside that room with him wouldn't come out to investigate. One angry parent was bad enough.

Max followed her. "I'm not going anywhere without your daughter, Mrs. Bright. Take it or leave it."

The silver rings around Taega's pupils flashed. "I will bar you from ever seeing my daughter again if you threaten me one more time, Mister Reacher. Take it or leave it."

Dallas shot him a pleading glance, the kind that was desperate enough to still his feet.

What a piss-off of a night this was turning out to be. Beating back the rage that was preparing to strike, Max swallowed his retort before he could utter the wrong thing to his girlfriend's mother—a handful of words he knew would get his ass dumped in an instant.

Taega took his silence for compliance and gestured for Dallas to follow her. They disappeared around a corner in the distance, too far away for Max's sharp hearing to pick up on their voices.

He knew he should stay put, but he couldn't help it, and he found his feet moving in their direction before he could stop them. Black swallowed his eyes as he walked, tracking them. They had exited the building, the spells now keeping him from seeing where they were going.

Max was through the doors before he could stop himself. It didn't take many steps before he was able to pick up on their conversation. Their voices were faint, but at least he could hear them now—and, more importantly, he could keep an ear out for Dallas. Her parents were some of the most complicated and unpredictable people he'd ever met. After what'd happened with Taega, and she'd given them information about Erasmus Sophronia and Loren's birth, he'd expected better from her, but it seemed he was wrong for that.

"You are not to listen in on your father's affairs." Taega's voice was quiet and cool.

"I didn't mean anything by it—"

A slap rang through the night.

Max lunged forward, but he stopped himself before he could round the corner, shoes skidding on pavement. His lungs were torn apart

with furious gasps, his blood like fire in his veins.

He knew he should walk away, but he couldn't bring himself to.

Blinking the Sight into place, he looked through the line of hedges they were standing behind.

Dallas was clutching her cheek. Taega was standing before her, arms crossed tightly over her chest. It was the latter who bit out, "Don't let it happen again." There was that phrase rearing its ugly head for the second time tonight.

Max bit his tongue and stilled his uncooperative feet again before he could intervene. But all he could see was a memory—an image of another young girl getting struck by her cold mother for something she didn't deserve. A girl who'd died far before her time, leaving Max to miss her for all eternity. That memory coated his airways with the same smoke that haunted his dreams, and screaming filled his ears.

Max blinked the memory away, forcing himself to breathe, to still the tremors moving through his arms.

Taega's voice was only slightly softer as she added, "I just want what's best for you, Dallas. And what's best for you right now involves concentrating on your studies and your training, and keeping your nose out of your father's business. Do you understand me?"

"Fine." The word was curt, but Max knew Dallas well enough now to detect the thickness of tears in her voice.

"Dallas," Taega rebuked, the word slicing through the night.

Dallas let her hand fall from her cheek. "Yes, Mom," she muttered, hugging her arms now. "I understand perfectly well."

"Good."

The tapping of high heels rang against the building and bounced through the parking lot.

Max retreated, his hellseher speed allowing him to make it back inside before Taega could find out he was eavesdropping.

As soon as Taega was inside, breezing past him with a sidelong glance as frigid as her smile, he was back out the doors, searching for Dallas.

He found her standing near the bench. There were no tears in her eyes, but she was still hugging herself, and her cheek was pink.

Max stopped several feet away. "You okay?"

She gave him a tense nod. "Yeah, I'm fine. She just wanted to talk." With a dismissive wave of her hand, she added, "Parents, you know? Love them and hate them."

"Right."

Dallas stared out at the parking lot. A breeze off the ocean stirred her hair back, carrying her scent to him—vanilla, and something earthy and warm, like fresh air in a forest. A minute of silence stretched between them before she was turning her body his way, her

eyes on her toes. "Can we go home?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Stepping up to her side, he gently pried the fingers of her right hand from her arm and laced them with his. "Let's get out of here."

He used his Sight as they walked through the parking lot, past row upon row of vehicles. The wind off the water of the Emerald Bay blew through his clothes and carried Dallas's hair over her shoulder, where it fluttered against his chest.

"I'm really sorry about all of that," Dallas said quietly.

"That's nothing to be sorry for, Dal. Everyone deals with some level of family drama."

"What's your family like?"

Max tensed, wishing he hadn't said that. But they'd been together long enough now that he figured she deserved the truth, especially because she was finally initiating a conversation that was deeper than the kind they usually had. Their relationship had been purely physical right from the beginning, and while Max had always wanted more, Dallas always seemed content to keep it the way it was.

"I haven't talked to my dad since I was a teenager," Max began. "He works for the Magical Protections Unit in Shadowhaven."

"And your mom?"

"My mom was a BP addict and a dealer. She was cooking up potions in our house one night when I was at an indoor ice rink with my dad. My parents were already split up by then, so Dad would come pick me up on the weekends before he moved to Shadowhaven. My sister was sleeping upstairs at my mom's house, and that was..." That was when it happened.

Dallas lightly squeezed his hand. "Listen, Max, maybe I shouldn't have asked—"

"She died that night," he choked out. "My sister. The house lit on fire, and my mom didn't even bother trying to save her. She got herself out instead."

"What was her name? Your sister."

"Maya." He swallowed. "Maya Jane Reacher. MJ for short." It had been years since he'd uttered her name, but he thought about her often. The memories never stopped hurting. "You know what the worst part about it was?"

Dallas waited.

"The fire destroyed everything—completely destroyed her. There was nothing left of her to bury, so we had to make due with a few of her belongings that managed to hang on by the time the MPU got there and put out the flames." Moisture clouded his vision. "You know what it's like to want to bury someone you love, but you're denied that simple request and are forced to bury photographs and stuffed



animals and clothes instead?"

When he glanced down at Dallas, he saw that her eyes were gleaming too. "I had no idea."

"How could you have? I've never told anyone about this, except the Devils."

"I'm so sorry, Max."

"So am I."

Max refused to let go of her hand until they reached the SUV. He escorted her to her door and opened it for her. He was about to get into the driver's seat when something on the vehicle made him pause.

"What the hell?" Max used his index finger to wipe up a drop from the windshield. He smeared it against his thumb, and when he took a whiff of the thick red liquid, his airways were assaulted with a salty scent that reminded him of iron.

Dallas stepped out of the vehicle. "Is that...?"

"Blood." He wiped it on his pants, eyes scanning the lot. With his Sight, he could see that the same spells that covered the resort also covered the parking lot, a layer of protection that would be difficult for many people or creatures to get through, unless they had been programmed for entry. Regardless, he said, "It was probably a demon fight or something. Get inside, Dal."

For once, she didn't argue. By the time Max was in the SUV, Dallas already had her seatbelt on and her door locked. He fired up the engine and peeled out of the lot, bits of gravel flying under the tires.

The headlights lit up the rows of cars, the glow falling upon the smattering of red that colored each one like paint thrown from a brush.

Dallas leaned forward, seatbelt pulling on her chest. "If that was a demon fight, it was a big one."

"It's either that or it was raining blood." He said it like he was joking, but he found himself leaning on the steering wheel and looking up at the star-dusted sky.

The forcefield was still in place, looking the exact same as it did every night. He didn't know what he was looking for, or why he would think blood could fall from the sky.

A demon fight. That was all it was.

Where was that damn grimoire?

It was Monday morning, and Loren was exhausted and sore from her weekend with Darien. Her whole body was throbbing, and there wasn't enough coffee in the world to keep her eyes from watering, a yawn climbing up her throat as she rifled through the contents of her over-stuffed locker, students buzzing past her in the hallway.

She hoped there were no mice hiding in the shadows behind her untidy row of books. She wasn't in the mood for a bitten finger and a trip to the emergency room. The pain she was currently feeling could be forgiven for how much fun she'd had with Darien, but an animal bite?

Yeah, she would pass on that one.

The whole row of ancient lockers rattled as the books that were crammed on the single shelf thumped from side to side. She cringed when the crumbs from some mysterious, long forgotten meal jammed up under her nails.

If that stupid book had run off again, she swore to the gods—

There it was. Her fingers closed around the cracked spine, and she pried it out from where it had managed to flatten itself against the very back of the locker, camouflaging with the metal. Given the concealment spells written on the book's pages, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised by how well the grimoire had managed to hide. She would have to remember to keep better tabs on this one. It was the fourth time she'd lost it this year, and Januarius had only just ended.

She pulled the grimoire out and stuffed it into her book bag. "No more hiding," she scolded, pointing a finger at the darkness inside the bag, the book already melting into its newest camouflage. "I need you to help me study."

Her phone buzzed in her bag, lighting up the inside of it. She pulled it out and read Darien's message.

*How are you feeling?*

*Like my body is one giant bruise*, she replied, smiling. One giant delicious bruise. He made her hurt in all the best ways.

*Bad enough to not want a repeat next weekend?*

*If we don't have a repeat next weekend, I might die.*

*Baby, we can't have that*, he said. Another message came through, chasing the first. *Make sure you rest that cute little ass of yours. I can't*

*wait till you're in my bed again.*

Loren's smile grew, her face heating up at the thought of the coming weekend. *Can we make a deal with Tempus and skip to Friday?*

When she hit send, the message froze, a red exclamation mark appearing beside it. On the top corner of her screen, next to the name of her cell phone provider, it read NO SERVICE.

*Clang!* She jumped a foot in the air as her locker door suddenly slammed shut, the sound knifing into her eardrums.

A boy was leaning against her locker. Light brown hair that was cropped short, gray eyes, a splash of freckles on his nose. He was tall, his shoulders broad, his waist narrow, and his skin an ivory shade. She almost didn't recognize him for a second, but then it dawned on her.

"Can I help you, Mister Stares A Lot?" She hung the strap of her book bag from her shoulder and crossed her arms.

"Any reason why you didn't show the other day?"

Loren frowned. "What the heck are you talking about? Who *are* you, anyway?"

"Still haven't figured it out?"

"You say that like I'm supposed to know, meanwhile you've literally been watching me like a creep for, like, three weeks now. Four? I've lost track. Honestly, what's the deal?"

Mister Stares A Lot scoffed. "You ace your classes, yet you're somehow dumb as a box of rocks. Makes me wonder if we've got the right girl." Right girl? Was he sent here by some of his buddies to pull some sort of prank on her or something? Was he one of Ethan McIntyre's newest recruits? She'd had enough of this.

She pushed up the sleeve of her cardigan and made a show of glancing at her bare wrist. "Gee, would you look at the time? I hate to cut this valuable conversation short, but I need to get going. Things to do, places to see. Thank you for the insults and all the staring. It's been swell." She gave him a lazy wave, but the moment they made eye contact again, she froze, making the connection that had eluded her only minutes ago.

She knew those eyes. The mouth that had a perpetual tilt to it, as if ready to sneer at the first opportunity. The shape of his nose and that sharp, angular jaw.

There was a pit in her stomach. "You're the—"

"Imperator's son, yeah," he said, looking impressed for a moment that passed quickly. Something told her his attention span and his patience were both very short. He held out a hand. "Name's Klay."

Loren ignored it. She stared at his face, refusing to uncross her arms or break his gaze.

"Alright." He let his hand fall against his thigh, a bitter laugh slicing the air. "I'll go fuck myself, then."

"I don't fraternize with the enemy."

"That's big talk for a little girl. You sure you want to declare the imperator your enemy?" Even though he kept his voice low, Loren glanced about the hallway. No one was watching them, but still.

She said quietly, "Why don't we chat outside?"

"We can *chat* when school's out. You'll be coming with me."

Loren's stomach dipped. "You mean you and...?" Him and the imperator.

"You got it, cupcake."

"Ew," she muttered under her breath. *Cupcake*. How revolting. "And what if I don't want to?"

"Listen." He stepped closer to her. Too close. He was tall, his presence looming. She didn't want to look up, but she did, and she found that there was torment in his eyes. She didn't trust it—didn't trust him at all—but something told her that he didn't want to be doing this. "You're going to want to be there this time. Trust me. I'm not the enemy, Loren." She didn't miss the undercurrent to his words, the one that reaffirmed her suspicions that he had been sent to do this against his will, a puppet yanked about by strings he couldn't cut.

Loren swallowed. "What does he want?"

"Just to check in."

Her brows rose. "Aren't you doing that for him right now?"

"He prefers to see for himself. Can you really blame him?" He made to turn away, but then he paused, seeming to remember something. Pointing a finger in her face, he said quietly, "Don't be mentioning this to your little friends or your Devil bodyguards. Got it?"

She lifted her chin, fighting the urge to bite his finger off. "And what if I do?"

"This warning comes from me, Loren. It doesn't come from my dad. He is willing to play nice as long as you follow his rules. He just wants to talk—that's it."

Sure. And then the minute she found out what the hell the imperator wanted this time, the information would be going straight to Darien, just like last time.

She offered Klay a stiff smile. "Understood."

So *this* was why he was here. But she didn't have time to say anything else, or to ask any questions.

He turned and walked away, leaving her staring after him.

Loren sighed and slumped against her locker. It looked like she wasn't getting out of this one.

Mondays usually dragged, but this one ended far too soon.

When the bells chimed at three p.m., signaling the end of herbology, the only class she didn't share with Sabrina or Dallas, she jumped from the sound. Students stood and gathered their things, the sound of excited chatter swelling to a roar around her.

She took out her phone and saw that there was still no cell reception. This was odd for a place like Angelthene; cell reception almost never failed, thanks to the cristala tower that pulled the anima mundi up from the planet's core. Which made her wonder if the imperator had anything to do with it. If he believed there was even the slightest chance that she would tell Darien about this, she wouldn't put it past him to shut down all cell service in the school.

He had been right to make that decision, because she had checked her phone all afternoon, waiting for the opportunity to send a message to Darien or one of the other Devils. But that same message she'd tried to send him before Klay showed up was still frozen on her screen.

With a sigh, she got to her feet and shoved her books into her book bag. She made her way out of the classroom, lost in thought as she walked, not noticing the figure leaning against the wall by the door until she was only a foot away from him.

"In case you get any bright ideas," Klay said, keeping his voice muted as he shrugged away from the wall.

Adjusting the straps of her bags, she marched past him, slamming her shoulder into his arm. "Your dad must be pretty powerful if he can shut off cell reception."

Klay followed her, a hungry wolf on her heels. "Considering he's the Terran Imperator? Yeah, he really is."

She glanced about the hallway. "Where is he wanting to talk?" They were already nearing the staircase.

Klay gestured to the doors below. "He's waiting for us by the gates."

Great.

Loren scanned the crowds of students, searching for Sabrina or Dallas, but they were nowhere to be found. And before she knew it, she was pushing through the doors, dodging students who mingled on the front steps, Klay hovering just behind her.

It was sunny today, but still oddly cool, the grass still damp from the brief spell of rain that'd swept through the city last night. The smell of it transported her back to Hell's Gate, when she'd awoken halfway through her sleep to the patter of the rain, Darien snuggled up against her side, his strong arms wrapped around her middle, his head resting against her hip. The nights when he stayed with her until dawn were few in number, but she cherished every single one.

Blinking away the memory, she drew a deep breath, steeling

herself for what was to come.

Klay stayed close to her side. Too close for comfort as they walked up the hill and through the gates that were ajar, droves of students passing through, magic staves and stacked grimoires in hand.

She didn't need to ask Klay where to go. There was a black limousine parked a short distance away, the sight of it bringing a sickening wave of *déjà vu* to Loren's stomach.

The last time she'd been inside this limousine, she had come face to face with not just the imperator, whose legal name was Quinton Lucent, but also Jonathon Kyle and Calanthe Croft, who'd entered the vehicle shortly after she'd slid onto the seat. Loren had stared at Calanthe in quiet shock for a long minute, wondering if it was a spell playing a trick on her, or if it really was Calanthe sitting before her. She'd ended up connecting the dots on her own: Tempus the Liar had turned back the clock to before Calanthe had shown up on the Control Tower and attacked her.

She still didn't fully understand it—how the wish had worked so many miracles while reversing others. If she thought too hard, it felt like her brain was liquefying in her skull.

The deaths of millions of people that day, Calanthe included, hadn't been an end at all, but the beginning of something new.

With a steadying breath, Loren stopped at the back door of the limousine.

The driver stepped out—a warlock who came around to her side and opened the door.

She got in the limousine, Klay following behind her. When the door banged shut, an eerie silence swept in, blocking off her way to the outside world. Trapping her in here with Quinton Lucent, Klay's father, who sat at the far end of the limousine, hands resting on his knees.

The imperator was a hellseher. He had to be pushing a hundred years old, but like most immortals, he displayed few signs of aging. His black hair was flecked with silver, his gray eyes sharp, just like Klay's. He was one of those men who might've been considered handsome, were it not for the look of hatred in his stare, the kind that suggested he rarely felt emotion at all.

Loren cleared her throat. "Klay said you wanted to check in."

Quinton Lucent said nothing.

Leather groaned as Loren fidgeted, the seat sticking to her thighs. "I haven't told anyone about Kalendae, I swear. And my powers... they're still gone—"

"Stop talking," the imperator said calmly. Quietly. "Just stop talking, Miss Calla."

She swallowed. Her heart was pounding so fast, she couldn't

separate the beats. She thought she might throw up.

The limousine started moving.

Loren swiveled in her seat to look out the back window as the school disappeared into the distance. “Where are we going? Where are you taking me?”

“You don’t listen very well, do you? Keep your mouth shut and maybe I won’t kill you.”

With effort, she forced herself to relax in her seat, interlocking her fingers between her knees to keep them from shaking.

Though the limousine drove the speed limit through Angelthene’s downtown core, it still felt like it was moving too quickly. Loren watched the vehicles passing by—sputtering city buses, impatient yellow taxis, airport shuttles, and marketing vehicles advertising nightclubs, blood bars, magic staves, and home security spells.

Eventually, the driver slowed to a stop on a street corner not far from the Temple of the Scarlet Star.

Loren turned to look out the back window.

She remembered this place. This was exactly the same spot where Darien had brought her and a few of the Devils that night they were forced to meet with Randal Slade.

When she turned back around, she saw that the imperator was watching her, a curious tilt to his lips. “We’re here.”

—

Loren never imagined she would be back here again.

The rushing of the underground waterfalls engulfed every other sound in the area. It swallowed up the pounding of boots and the echo of voices, making her feel like she was being held prisoner in a glass bubble. The many armed men lining the tunnels, all of them heavily muscled and dressed in black, certainly didn’t help. The cool temperature of the waterfall’s overspray raised a chill on her arms as she walked by, fenced in on all sides by the imperator’s men, every one of them carrying machine guns in gloved hands.

Where the Well replica had once sat was now nothing but a pit in the ground. Broken rock and debris had been cleared from the tunnel path, making the trek to wherever they were heading quicker and easier than she’d hoped. Klay stayed at her side the whole time. When she dared a glance in his direction, she could’ve sworn he looked just as nervous as she felt. His eyes flicked about the interconnecting tunnels, his throat bobbing with every swallow. The way he was reacting made her own nerves worse than they already were, but she fought them, willing herself to stay strong long enough to get through this and back to Darien.

The group came to a stop several feet past the pit. Loren stopped too, the mist from the waterfalls chilling her to the bone.

The Terran Imperator turned to face her, folding his hands before him. "We're here."

Loren glanced about. "And where is here? You led me all this way to stare down a dead end?" They were going to kill her. Her heart was in her throat, but she would go down fighting until the bitter end. Singer was at full attention in her shadow. Maybe, with his help, they could get out of here alive. If she could get to Hell's Gate, Darien and the others would know what to do.

The imperator gestured to the cement wall at his back. "Maybe you need to change your perspective. Come beside me, will you?"

She looked at Klay. He was staring at the floor, jaw flexed. With shaking legs, she stepped forward, pulse racing. The imperator lightly placed his hand on her arm and guided her toward the wall, and then he turned her body so she was facing west.

"What exactly am I looking—" Her words stuck in her throat, because she saw it then.

The wall was rippling as if it were alive. The motion was only visible from certain angles, just like the forcefield, but instead of green it was a shimmering black. It stretched from floor to ceiling, and it moved with an undulating motion, like fabric caught in a breeze.

Loren stumbled back. "What is this? What am I looking at?"

"While some call it the Barrier, we prefer *Veil* or *Divide*," Quinton replied, his gravelly voice rising above the rushing of the waterfalls. "I'm going to explain this as simply as I can." Gesturing to the pit in the floor, he told her, "There on that floor was a magical artifact that should never have been created. When it exploded on Kalendae, it gave off such a powerful blast of raw magic that it tore a hole into a realm that has not been accessed in thousands of years. That realm goes by many names, but the most common is Spirit Terra. Some prefer Afterlife or Lower World. It is the place of all things dead and dying. A place that is neither here nor there—"

"Betwixt and between," Loren finished on a quiet breath.

"Right. Betwixt and between."

Loren's mind spun as she tried to comprehend, the events of Kalendae breezing through her mind at a dizzying speed. "But I shielded the city." She saw herself in her memories, standing only several feet from where she stood now, her aura forming a wall of white around the replica of the Arcanum Well. "I stopped the blast with my aura."

"You didn't stop it, you merely confined it to a smaller space. The Well still exploded, and it cut into the Veil like a hot knife sliding through soft butter. Such a sheer level of power, when combined with



your rare magic, is unstoppable, Loren.”

Tipping her head back, she looked up at where the shimmering curtain ended, just shy of the ceiling of the tunnel, only a short distance below where cars drove and pedestrians walked.

“We believe,” Quinton continued, “that when the Well replica exploded, the blast of magic was echoed by something in Spirit.”

“The real Arcanum Well.” If that was true, then it did still exist. If only her father had given her the answers she’d sought at dinner the other night, instead of being so stubborn and selfish.

And if it still existed, then that meant her father, after transmuting the Well and binding its powers to his soul, had found a way to extract it again. To turn it back into its original form—or perhaps a new one.

For a moment, as she stood there, staring at the mistake her magic had created, she found herself hating him—hating her father. She knew it wasn’t fair, but she didn’t care. She hated him for keeping so many secrets, not just from her, but from everyone else he’d ever cared about. This mess was his fault—his, and the Phoenix Head Society’s.

Quinton looked impressed by her conclusion. “That is correct, Loren. And with the Well and its replica combined, answering one another’s calls, their magic sliced through the curtain separating life from death; Terra from Spirit.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“I want you to find the real Arcanum Well.”

Loren’s mouth turned dry. “By going in *there*? Are you crazy?” If this curtain was a doorway into the spirit realm... There was no telling what would happen if she walked in there. Nor was there any way of telling what lived in there.

“You can track the Well, Loren. You wouldn’t have been able to before even if you’d tried because the Divide wouldn’t have allowed for it. Now that it has been weakened, and there is a way in, there is nothing to hinder the task. The Well *can* be found—by you and only you.”

“Except my magic is gone,” she said, grateful for this fact for the first time since Kalendae. “I told you that the first time you dropped by my school to threaten me.”

“I don’t believe it is gone. I think if you learn how to call upon it, you can do this for me.”

“And why should I help you?”

“Because we will kill you if you don’t.” Quinton’s answer was flat, voiced like a fact that could not be challenged.

Her breaths came faster as she scrambled for an excuse out of this, but the more she stood there, the more apparent it became that she

was trapped. Quinton Lucent was the most powerful person in the world; whatever he asked for, he received. But this little fact didn't stop her from saying, "Darien will—"

"He will what, Loren?" Quinton interrupted. His tone was cold and taunting, eyes hard as glass. "What will he do? He doesn't know you're here, does he?" Two long strides brought him face to face with her, so close that she could smell his cologne, the scent of it nauseating. "Allow me to enlighten you on exactly what will happen if you attempt to work against me."

Something pushed at her mind, making her tense. She tried to step back, but he grabbed onto her throat with a hard hand, holding her firmly in place. Eyes, black as sin, glared down at her as his magic hacked into her mind, showing her a terrible image. Just one, but it was enough to haunt her for the rest of her life.

The image consisted of a pile of bodies, their heads twisted at horribly wrong angles. They were covered in blood, their skin and clothes soaked with it. The faces of everyone she cared about—Darien and the other Devils, Dallas and Sabrine, Logan and Dominic—were blank with death.

Loren shut her eyes, moisture burning them. She fought to break free, nails ripping into the back of the imperator's big hand. But he held firm, squeezing her throat so hard her eyelids opened again in a flash. She gagged, face turning purple.

Leaning in close, so close that his hot breath snaked along the side of her neck, he whispered, "I'm not afraid of anything that bleeds, Loren. And your Darkslayer bleeds just like the rest of us."

He let go of her with a shove.

All the blood in her head drained down to her feet. She swayed in place, her tattoo burning her arm. "Don't hurt them," she choked out, her voice as ragged as she felt. "You can't hurt them."

"I won't," he said, the words sickeningly gentle, as if he were speaking to a crying child. "Not if you cooperate." Quinton's answer, no matter how softly spoken, echoed from all sides of her, and suddenly the ground was rising and falling, the walls closing in on her. The edges of her vision turned gray as a fainting spell beckoned her into its cold grasp.

Why here? Why *now*?

Worst timing. This was the worst timing for this.

Loren staggered to the wall, where she caught herself against the icy concrete. She slid her bags off her shoulder. They thumped at her feet, the medication tucked into the side pouch of her purse rattling. "I need to take my medication."

There was a small smile on Quinton's face, a smile that grew as he said to one of his men, "Bring her some water."

Loren crouched on the floor and took her half-empty metal water bottle out of her book bag. "Nice try," she managed to say, her tongue fat and clumsy.

The smile on his face didn't dim.

With clammy hands, Loren popped the lid off the prescription bottle and shook a pill into her palm. She practically threw the pill into her mouth, tossing her head back and chasing it with lukewarm water that tasted metallic. She had to get rid of this feeling; the last thing she wanted was to faint around these people. Who knew where she would wake up? Maybe behind that curtain, in a world she had no idea how to navigate.

By the time the water hit her hollow stomach, she realized something was wrong. The fainting spell dissipated, but in its place was a new feeling that shook her to her core. It was a rush of tingles that spread from the crown of her head to the balls of her feet, making her nose itch and her tongue feel like it was being stretched out of her throat.

The water bottle slipped through her grasp and clanged against the cement, where it rolled into the wall, the last of the water seeping out into a puddle on the floor.

She looked up at the emperor to see that he was still smiling at her.

"You drugged me." Her voice was a shaking whisper.

"I didn't drug you, I placed you under a spell," he said. "The first thing you would've done is tattle to your little gutter lord, and we can't have that."

While she was in class... That was when it must've happened. She had left her water bottle in her locker for part of the day, and even after retrieving it she hadn't drank any until now. Klay must've taken it out and slipped the spell ingredients—tasteless, odorless, colorless—inside.

The world dipped beneath her knees. She was trapped. She might be free to walk out of here, free to go back to Hell's Gate or back to school, or anywhere in the world really, but her freedom of speech was gone, and without it she didn't know what she would do.

When the emperor spoke again, he was addressing his son, who was standing several feet away with crossed arms, eyes on the floor. "The limousine is still out front," Quinton said. "Make sure she gets back to school safely, will you?"

Suddenly, it wasn't the creatures of the night that felt like the greatest danger to her, but this hellseher—this man who was watching her shake on the floor at his feet, a look of sick anticipation on his face.

"I will be in touch with you when we are ready to have you back

here,” Quinton said. “There are a few things we need to prepare, and then you will find that Well for me.”

“And if I don’t want to?” she bit out.

The scar on his lip deepened with a sneer. “You *will* find it for me, Loren.” He came closer. Slowly, he crouched before her, elbows on his knees. “You will find it, or I will destroy everyone you love.”

“Glad to see you’ve reconsidered,” Gaven said.

He was sitting across from Darien in the Devil’s Advocate in the same room as last time. The bass from the music thumped against the walls, the distant clink of glasses and the chatter of voices and laughter floating through the crack under the door.

It was past Witching Hour, the place packed with wasted customers, despite that it was a Monday. This place catered to the broken, and the broken didn’t take any days off. Four men stood on either side of Gaven, a wall of solid muscle and icy gazes.

Gaven never seemed to go anywhere without at least one person watching his back. While Gaven likely intended for this to be seen as a sign of being capable and prepared, Darien only saw it as a weakness, which was exactly why he himself had walked through the doors of the club alone. Gaven was careful to never betray any signs of being rattled, but Darien was gifted enough in feeling auras that he could sense Gaven was at least a little unnerved by this, if not entirely impressed by it, which was exactly why Darien had made this move.

Of course, he never went anywhere unprepared either. Malakai, Valen, and Sylvan were waiting in the alley between the club and Dark Heaven—the vampire-run liquor store next door—watching through the walls for any indication that they might need to intervene. Darien had asked Tanner, who was currently stationed at Hell’s Gate, to weaken the spells tonight for this very reason, leaving the goings-on inside the club visible to Malakai and his Reapers for however long it would take to get through this conversation.

Darien couldn’t wait to see the look on Gaven’s face when he threw his ass behind bars.

“I didn’t exactly have a choice, did I?” Darien replied, keeping his tone as level and cool as Gaven’s.

A smirk hooked his lips up. “No, you didn’t. You’ve chosen wisely, and not just for yourself, if you understand what I’m saying.” The implication had Darien’s hands itching to strike, but he was careful to manage his emotions this time, leaving his expression clear, his fingers hanging casually at his sides. Gaven continued, “You’re smart, Darien. I knew you were smart.”

“I understand you perfectly well,” Darien began, “but if we are going to move forward with this, I’m going to need for you to understand something as well.” He allowed for a pause. Gaven cocked

his head, looking far too amused. “I want you and your men to respect my boundaries and stay away from my girl, my family, and my house. Can you do that?”

“Deal.” Gaven smiled. “We meant no harm, Darien. We just wanted your compliance.” The emerald ring on his thumb flashed as he retrieved an envelope from a pocket inside his suit jacket and slid it across the table. “This is the date and time for the next shipment. Re-establish your father’s connections, make sure his men are still willing to run for us, and give them the new route I’ve written down.”

Darien grabbed the envelope and tucked it into his jacket.

“Consider this your test run. If all goes smoothly, and there’s no shady business on your part, you’ll have made yourself some lifelong friends. We’re the type you want in a world like this, Darien.”

Darien pushed his chair back and stood. “I have enough friends. I’ll get your routes running and your clients secured. Meanwhile, you’ll keep your nose out of my personal life. That’s all I ask.”

Gaven leaned back in his chair, smile widening. “We’re looking forward to doing business with you.”

—

Darien had been doing well, all things considered. He’d almost made it to the doors of the club when a Surge swept into his mind, claiming him with such force that he nearly fell on his ass.

The voices in the club swelled to a garbled roar. Lights, colors, and sounds fused together, growing and echoing at a blaring volume. It felt like he was being consumed, like many hands were peeling his flesh off his bones, cracking his skull open and turning his brains inside out.

Surges were always bad, no matter how severe or mild. But this—

Darien had lost his bearings. He couldn’t remember where the doors were, and there were too many people, too many sounds. The blood in his veins was acid, and the need to hit and kill took hold of his thoughts, turning his hands into tight fists and his lungs into a suffocated pulp.

He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think.

Pushing through the crowds, he tried to find composure, but the harder he tried to suppress the Surge, the worse it became. People scrambled to get out of his way, looking downright terrified of him. He didn’t blame them; he was terrified of himself.

He had just spotted the neon EXIT sign glowing above a door that led into the alley when a memory swooped into his mind—

*“He’s telling his teachers at that fucking school that he wants to work for*

the law when he grows up.” Standing in the kitchen of the penthouse in Angelthene’s North End, Randal crumpled Darien’s homework into a ball, squeezing it with a scarred fist.

A thirteen-year-old Darien was standing outside his bedroom door, peering down the hallway, watching when he knew he shouldn’t. Ivyana was sitting at the kitchen table, Soot curled up in her lap. She was choking down the last of her supper, finishing every bite on her plate, just like she was told. She kept her head down the whole time, pretending not to listen to her parents. Darien could hear her heart racing from here.

Their mother stood across from Randal, arms crossed, whole body stiff as she tried to reason with her husband. “He’s young, Randal.” Her voice shook. “He’ll grow out of it.”

“He’d better.” Randal pointed a finger in her face. “You make damn sure that idea is wiped out of his feeble mind, Em, or I’ll beat it out of him. You got that?”

Elsie ducked her head, her waves of reddish-brown hair concealing her face from Darien’s view. “Yes, Randal.”

“You know what?” Those eyes looked like they were glowing. “I’m going to beat it out of him right now.” Boots pounded as he stomped out of the kitchen, throwing the ball of homework at the wall. Clenching his fists at his sides, he stalked down the hallway, picking up his pace as soon as he caught sight of Darien, black consuming those hateful eyes.

Darien’s stomach churned as he watched his mother sprint after her husband, nearly falling as her socked feet slipped on the spotless floors.

“Randal!” Elsie called, voice shaking. “Randal, please—leave him alone. He’s just a boy—”

Randal backhanded her across the face. She rebounded off the wall before crumpling to the floor, clutching her flaming cheek.

Darien’s nostrils flared, hands curling into tight fists at his sides. The fight-or-flight response sweeping through his body left his heart pounding, but the rage he felt for his father drowned it out. Chin high, he stood firm, refusing to back down.

Ivy was closing her eyes, clutching Soot to her chest. Rocking back and forth in her chair, probably wishing she could teleport away from here, just like she always told Darien in the quiet of the night, when they hid together under blankets and sheets, the glow of a flashlight their only company.

It was the pain his mother and sister were feeling that protected him from registering his own as his father dragged him into his room by the elbow, where he let loose with his fists and belt.

Darien didn’t make one sound the whole time his father beat him, not even when the belt cut into the skin of his back, leaving scars that would last for the rest of his horribly long life.

Not a single sound.

“*Fuck, fuck, fuck,*” Darien muttered, squeezing his head in his hands as he burst through the side door of the Advocate and staggered into the alley, boots splashing in puddles that smelled like piss, the mercury-vapor lights shooting into his eyes. “*Fuck—I can’t take it anymore!*”

“Everything okay?” Malakai’s voice was faint. The Reaper shrugged away from where he was leaning against the graffitied wall, hands in the pockets of his black leather jacket. Sylvan and Valen, who were smoking at his side, butted out their cigarettes and followed Malakai.

Footsteps chased him down the alley, but he couldn’t catch his breath. The world kept spinning, and the sounds kept swelling, loud and invasive. He felt like he could hear and see and smell everything in the universe—the thumping of the music in the club, the tires of passing cars humming on the road out front, the freshly pressed clothes in the laundromat down the street, the rushing of the Angelthene River, the honking of car horns on bridges miles away, the cawing of gulls over the ocean, the smell of fresh snow on faraway mountain peaks, the bursting of stars in distant galaxies—

“Darien?”

“What’s wrong with him?”

The voices got louder. Tenser.

Head in his hands, Darien paced in the alley, stepping on his own boots. The air reeked of garbage and liquor and piss and vomit and burnt rubber and stagnant water and—*fuck*, when would it *end*?

“He okay?”

“Give him space.”

“He needs help.”

“Don’t touch him! I said he needs space.”

Metal clanged as Darien banged his knee against the corner of an overflowing dumpster. He staggered into the wall beside it, cracking his forehead and knuckles against the brick.

The bolt of pain that accompanied the hit managed to push the Surge away. He was able to blink away the black, able to slow his breathing, able to stand still for several minutes, leaning against that wall like he was cowering, forehead digging into the brick.

But he *was* a coward, wasn’t he? This was what cowards did. His whole body was shaking, head spinning, but he was starting to get a hold on the Surge, thank gods.

Garbage crunched under boots as someone stepped up to his side.

“Stay,” Darien bit out, swallowing heavily, lungs shaking, “away.”

“Shit, man.” It was Malakai. There was empathy in his words. “I know what this feels like. You got this though—”

Darien pushed off the wall and spun around to face him. “*Does it look like I fucking got this?*” he seethed, nostrils flaring. He grabbed Malakai by the collar, knuckles oozing blood. “*Does it, Malakai?*”



Because it doesn't fucking feel like it!"

Malakai didn't flinch or pull away, but he didn't say anything either, he only watched him. There was understanding in his gaze. Understanding, and maybe compassion—two things Darien loathed at a time like this.

Darien let him go with a shove and buried his hands in his jacket pockets. The Surge was aching to return, the edges of his vision blurring with a mist of gray and black.

It was Valen who said, "How long has this been going on?"

"Since my mom died." The truth was out before he could stop it. He'd had Surges while she was alive, but back then she had taught him how to handle them, how to cope. The day she died was the day they'd taken over his life, and he'd barely been able to catch a break since.

He started pacing, hating himself for showing these three men—barely allies, and certainly not friends, at least not anymore—this horrible weakness. Until tonight, Malakai was the only Reaper who'd known about this. Darien had been friends with him for years, and because of this they'd handled Surges around each other often, had done drugs together to numb the pain. But they'd always kept it to themselves, never speaking of the shit they felt, not to anyone.

"It's fine," Malakai said, waving away the hints of fear on Valen and Sylvan's auras. "We're not going to speak of this, are we, boys?" They murmured their agreements. "Dare, man. It's alright, I understand—"

"You can't understand!" he barked, lurching up to where Malakai stood, barely an inch separating the Reaper's face from his own. Malakai lifted his chin as Darien spat, "No one understands what it's like inside my head. *This*—" He tapped his own temple hard. "*This* is hell. It's hell in here, and no one can save me from this fucking breaking." His voice shook on the last word, and he started pacing again.

Suddenly, his vision buzzed and flickered, like static on a television turned to the wrong channel. The alley jerked and bounced, colors bleeding out of it, leaving nothing in its place but a monochrome mess that left him staring in confusion.

At the end of the alley, squatting on its haunches, was a horned creature. Its body was skeletal, most of its bones laid bare for all to see. Bits of rotting flesh draped off a ribcage that was cracked in several places. A dark heart beat within that cage of bone, black oil dripping out of it with every thump. A teal blue light shone from inside the heart.

The creature was consuming something. The wet crunch of bone and flesh raised a chill on the back of Darien's neck.

Slowly, it turned to face him. Its horns ended in sharp points, shallow grooves running from base to tip. Those grooves were oozing with the same black substance dripping from its heart.

“What the hell?” Darien panted. He stumbled back, nearly losing his footing as he slammed into something hard.

“Darien?” Malakai’s voice sounded far away.

Someone stepped in front of him, concealing the creature with the glowing eyes as it stood from its crouch, something dead and decaying hanging limp in its sharp claws, blood dripping to the cobblestones.

“What’s he looking at?” Valen’s voice floated to him, distant and concerned.

Darien tried to point around Valen. “Do you see that?”

The grayscale of the alley shuddered back into full color, the mercury-vapor lights washing everything in a fresh coat of lime-green.

When Valen stepped out of his way, and the three Reapers turned to look at where Darien gestured, there was nothing there but cobblestones and puddles of muck. No hint of teal light, no smell of the blood Darien swore he’d seen dripping to the ground, no oily black substance secreted from a pounding heart.

Malakai’s boots splashed through mud as he came around to face Darien, his expression severe. “Are you okay?” he demanded. “I fucking mean it this time, *are* you okay?”

Darien thought he might puke. “You didn’t see it?”

“See what?”

“There was...” He worked to clear his vision, squeezing his lids shut with every blink. “I thought I saw something.”

Sylvan and Valen shared a heavy look.

Choking back bile, he straightened his jacket and pulled away from Sylvan, realizing at that moment that the Reaper had been gripping it in fists, keeping him on his feet.

Shit, had he really almost fallen down?

He should’ve brought his Devils here, instead of these three. Maybe then he wouldn’t have laid bare his fucked-up mind for everyone to see. But he was doing his best to protect his family, keeping them away from Gaven and this mess of an agreement, which was why he’d made the decision to call Malakai before coming here. He would rather involve the Reapers than put the lives of the people who meant the most to him on the line. Max had offered to come, but he’d shut him down. Just because he was being dragged into this didn’t mean any of his Devils had to be.

“I’m fine.” He swallowed. Sweat prickled across his brow, but he felt cold, like his chest was icing over. “Let’s get out of here.”

The others whispered to each other as they followed him out of the alley, but he paid them no mind.

Something...he'd seen something. It was either that, or he had hallucinated the creature.

To hallucinate meant to experience something that seemed real but was not actually present, typically as a result of a mental disorder or of being on drugs.

He sure as shit wasn't on any drugs, so that could only mean...

Was he crazy? Or was there something else going on?

---

Back in his car, alone at last, Darien took several minutes to focus on breathing. The Reapers ripped by on their motorcycles, Malakai turning his head to look at the car as he passed. Darien knew he couldn't see in—the spells were too thick for that—but he still felt horribly seen. The magic powering the motorcycles glowed brightly, ribbons of color threading together like DNA strands in the glass tanks that were located between the seat and dashboard.

As soon as he'd caught his breath, he dialed Loren, desperate to hear her voice. The day had been filled with so much shit, he hadn't had a chance to speak with her yet.

The line rang twice before her soft voice drifted through the speaker, every word groggy with sleep. "Darien?"

"Baby, hey, it's me." His own greeting almost made him slap himself in the face. Of course she knew it was him; she'd greeted him by name, and she had caller identification. Shit, his mind was spinning. Would he even be able to drive without crashing?

Sheets rustled in the background. "Are you okay?" she croaked. The flick of what sounded like a light switch sliced into his hearing, making him wince.

"Yeah, I'm fine, sweetheart," he reassured her, blinking hard. The headlights of passing cars pulsed through his window, the glow of streetlights on the intersection up ahead bright as flares. He repeated, breathless, "I'm fine. Why?"

There was a pause, and when she spoke again, she sounded more awake, concern heavy in her tone. "You sound tense."

"Nah, I'm fine, I'm fine. I just needed to hear your voice." He shouldn't have called her. If he'd taken a minute to think through his actions, he would've realized how worried she would be. He rarely ever called her at this hour. But he was already feeling better now that he was talking to her. The sprint of his heart had slowed to a steady jog, and the thumping in his head had become a dull ache instead of a shooting pain.

"Okay." She didn't sound like she believed him, but she was letting it go. "Where are you?"

"The Devil's Advocate. I had to take care of a few things here, but I'm heading home now."

"Did everything go okay?" She was always careful to omit any names whenever they spoke on the phone, just like he'd told her to.

"Everything went just fine. Nothing to worry about."

"Good. That's good, Darien." She sounded tired, a yawn threatening to swallow up her words.

"I'm so sorry for waking you up."

"It's okay, you don't have to be sorry." There was a brief pause, and her voice turned into a hoarse whisper as she added, "I'm always here for you." Something about the way she said it made him sit up straighter.

"Everything okay with you?" Silence weighed the phone down, sending a tremor through his hand. "Loren?"

A breath rattled the speaker. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm just tired."

He settled back against his seat. He felt like such a dick for waking her up. "Get some sleep. I'll see you on the weekend."

"Are you picking me up on Thursday?"

"Friday."

"Why Friday?" The disappointment in her question pulled on Darien's heart, like there was a rock tied to it.

"I want you at the house less. I don't want you there by yourself, so it's best if we make your stays involve Friday through Sunday for the next little while, so that someone can always be at the house with you. Until I...figure some things out." The thought of her being at Hell's Gate, now that Gaven knew where the house was...

The thumping in his chest turned into a sprint again.

"Okay." Sheets rustled, and another click told him she'd turned the lamp off. "Should I be scared?"

"No, sweetheart. I'll kill anyone who comes near you, I promise. You just have to listen to me. Alright?"

"Kay. I love you."

"Sweet dreams, love."

He ended the call and threw his phone onto the console, where it clattered against the windshield. Propping an elbow up on his door, he cupped a hand to his mouth and watched the headlights passing outside his window, Loren's question echoing through his mind.

*Should* she be scared? Fuck, he didn't know. After how poorly he'd handled his Surge tonight, barely managing to hide it from Gaven and his men, and then completely failing to hide it from Malakai and his Reapers, could he even do this? The uncertainty was driving him mad.

But even if he failed, even if all this went to shit, there was one thing he would never let happen, and that was Loren getting hurt. He would always protect her, even if it cost him his life.

When Darien ended the call, Loren kept watching the screen. It went black after a couple minutes, leaving her alone with her reflection, her own empty face staring back at her through the glass.

She had spent her evening in the academy library, flipping through countless grimoires and text books in search of anything that might give her information about the spell stilling her tongue—the spell she had attempted to speak around just now, when Darien had asked her if she was okay. But none of the books had anything to say about it.

The conclusion she'd drawn was that the spell was either new or rare. After all, she had never heard of it before, not in all her years of schooling. No doubt it was hard to master as well, but the imperator had ties that stretched across land and sea. As the ruler of every bit of land in the world, there likely wasn't a lot he didn't know about. And if there was anyone in Terra who could learn how to manipulate a person this badly, it was Quinton Lucent.

But she wouldn't give up. She might be powerless right now, but that didn't mean she would be this way forever. For every spell that existed, there was one that countered it, and she was determined to figure out what it was.

Saturday had arrived. Days had passed since Loren had seen the imperator. *Days*. Nothing new had come of his threats, though Klay had watched her during every school day, the stupid ass. She had debated testing out her right hook on his nose, but she had resisted.

Loren knew better than to think the imperator would forget about their agreement and decide to leave her alone, so she knew it was only a matter of time before she would be forced to face him again.

She tried not to think about it as she carried on with her life, using every spare moment to attempt to speak around the spell, only to fail horribly. She tried writing it out, typing it out. She tried speaking in another language, tried visual gestures and signs. She even resorted to asking Singer if he could alert Bandit, but the Familiar was bound by the same spell. Nothing worked. Every attempt, no matter how subtle, numbed her tongue and voice box. Even her hands turned stiff and immobile whenever she tried sign languages.

There must be a way around it, and if there was, she had to find it.

Loren was completing her paperwork at the end of her shift at the Mortar and Pestle when the bells hanging above the door to the apothecary clanged. The sign in the window said they were closed, but she must've forgot to lock the door before coming up here.

She wheeled the chair away from the desk and got to her feet, hoping whoever had wandered in here was friendlier than the last person, a witch who'd clucked orders at her like she was a servant. Fanning the sweat on her forehead with a hand, she walked to the top of the stairs overlooking the bottom floor of the apothecary, white sundress swishing around her legs. Singer trailed behind her, panting in the humidity.

The air conditioner was definitely broken. Loren had told Mordred and Penny about it last weekend, but they hadn't fixed it yet. She didn't blame them; the weather had been very unpredictable lately. For every sunny day, there had been at least two or three rainy ones.

Loren was about to inform the late customer that they were closed for the evening when she froze.

On the bottom floor, her father was shutting the door behind him, sealing off the warm golden light of the late afternoon. Unaware that she was watching him, he took off his bucket hat and fanned it in the air, catching his breath. Sweat glinted on his face, and his button-up shirt was damp, the plaid fabric clinging to his lower back.

Loren propped a hand on the doorframe and drummed her sharp nails on the worn wood.

His eyes found her face. He appeared startled to see her, regardless of the fact that he'd just walked into her place of work. She raised a brow, and he scratched at the back of his neck.

"You're lucky the door was unlocked," Loren said, "or I wouldn't have bothered to let you in." When Erasmus didn't reply, his mouth hanging open like a fish, she prompted, "If you're looking to buy something, you'll have to come back another time. We're closed." She started to walk back to the desk.

"Hold on j-just a minute, Loren."

Loren had to consciously bite down on her irritation as she turned back around. Her blood boiled in her veins at the sight of the man who'd thrown her headfirst into countless problems—the man responsible for the silencing spell on her tongue, the threat made on Darien's life, the re-emergence of the Phoenix Head Society. Not to mention the emperor's plans to create his vision of a perfect world.

It was hard to care about the fact that Erasmus was her father when she started weighing the negative against the good—and when she realized there was far more of the former than there was the latter.

As he fumbled for words, he twisted his hat in his hands, looking lost, as always. "Look, I know you're angry with me."

She gave him an incredulous look, her blood now scalding. More sweat beaded on her face as she thought of the entrance into Spirit Terra slumbering beneath the city. Another of the many things that were his bloody fault—another problem he was incapable of fixing. "You think?" she ground out.

"I would appreciate the ch-chance to be heard, if you would let me speak." He paused—just long enough to make sure she would, indeed, let him speak. There was steam blowing out her ears. "I did some thinking," he began, "after you expressed to me how b-badly you want to help Darien. And I r-realized there is something you could try."

She crossed her arms. "I *could* try magic, if someone would just tell me how."

Erasmus ignored the snide comment. "There's a tonic that's widely known in Yveswich to help their hellseher population who struggle with Surges. It's n-not very well known outside of the city. And after they invented the Caliginous Chambers, most people stopped using the t-tonic. But I traveled there several years ago, so I'm familiar with it." His mentioning of several years ago made them both flinch.

Several years ago—when he was ignoring the reality of having a daughter who'd grown up without him, and friends who had spent their lives hiding a secret for someone they'd believed was dead.

Someone they *still* believed was dead. He'd deceived so many people; was there anyone left who knew the full truth about her father? About the Phoenix Head Society? She was beginning to think not. Even Taega and Roark...not even they knew the full extent of it.

Erasmus continued, his dark blue eyes sweeping about the cluttered apothecary, "In fact, you might even have what you need right here in this very shop."

Irritation still prickled inside her, but she had to admit she was intrigued. She could push her father-daughter troubles to the side for a while, if it meant she might be able to help Darien with his Surges.

Loren stared at the vines that were wrapped around the railing of the staircase. "What would I need to make this tonic?"

"It's quite a simple r-recipe, really. It calls for sixteen ounces of water and four tablespoons each of valerian, blackfire, and witch's vine. S-steep in hot water, sweeten with honey, and away you go."

Loren scanned the shelves down below. Two of those things she had, but the third... Witch's vine was an ingredient the twins didn't typically stock, since there wasn't much of a demand for it in the area. Which meant she would have to find some.

Her father was watching her. She could feel his probing stare, but she refused to look at him, instead calculating how many hours of daylight remained. Judging from the patch of sunshine on the scuffed floorboards below, she had about two hours total of full and partial light. Enough to get the ingredients for Darien so she could make the tonic tonight. She couldn't bear to live through one more night of seeing him suffer.

Erasmus cleared his throat. "Do you have what you need?"

When she pulled her attention away from the bright light on the floor, a square of gray floated in her vision. She blinked it away and turned her back on her father. "I have two things, and I'll be able to find the third just fine."

There was a short pause, and then Erasmus said quietly, "Say hello to Darien for me. And l-let me know if it works, will you?"

"I will." When she spoke again, her voice was tight, and she kept her back facing him. "Thank you for the suggestion." She walked back to the desk without another word, though she listened to see if he lingered.

Another few seconds passed before the bells chimed with his departure.

Loren finished up the last of the paperwork, ignoring the stir of emotions that told her she had been too dismissive, too cold. Maybe she *was* too dismissive and too cold. But after how many years Erasmus had forced her to survive without him, believing the whole time that he was dead...believing a *lie* he'd so carefully built to hide



from everyone...

She knew she would forgive him one day—for all of it. She didn't have it in her to hold grudges, at least not forever. But it would take a little more than the ingredients for a tonic—a tonic that may or may not help Darien—to earn that forgiveness.

Honesty, on the other hand...

She grabbed her tote bag off the desk and changed into a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers. When she was finished, she grabbed her small crossbody purse, and then stuffed her heels and dress in the tote bag.

Honesty, she could work with, and it was all she really wanted.

Loren stepped out into the avenue. As she locked the door behind her, the sun warming her head, she thought through her plan.

Witch's vine could be found in the district of Hooded Skullcap, a place that always had a strong travel advisory due to demon activity. But the sun wouldn't be setting for a while. If she hopped a bus, she would be able to make it there and back to Hell's Gate before her safety became much of a concern. She would have to watch out for the assortment of dangers that wandered about in broad daylight, but at least the demons wouldn't be a concern at this time.

With the other two ingredients she would need to make the tonic tucked into her bag, Loren boarded a city bus. She sat near the front, only three rows from the door. Staying close to exits was a safety habit she would likely spend the rest of her life unable to break.

On the chance that something bad were to happen, she called Ivy and left a message on her voicemail, letting her know where she was going and what she was doing. When she hung up, she set her bags on the floor by her feet and slumped against the window, directly beneath an icy stream of air conditioning blowing from a grubby vent.

Singer was fidgeting in her shadow. She consoled him in her thoughts, his agitation throwing her back in time—to the night she'd lost him to the demons in that alley. She was careful to keep those memories buried beneath regular, mundane thoughts, in case Singer was sharing her mind at that moment. Neither of them wanted to relive that terrible, dark day. Besides, they were together now. And they always would be.

It wasn't until the bus had entered the outskirts of Hooded Skullcap that she realized she was being watched.

—

The bus ride from the Avenue of the Scarlet Star to Hooded Skullcap took a little over half an hour.

At last, the driver lurched to a stop on a dirt road, a cloud of dust

billowing over the bus. The fields surrounding the road were awash with red light, the slanted rays of an evening sun transforming the blades of grass into a sea of flames.

Loren waited, watching out of the corner of her eye as a handful of other passengers got off the bus. The three hellsehers she suspected were watching her—two men and one woman—slid out of their seats. They thumped down the aisle, chattering to each other as they walked, bags clunking against their backs. On their way out, they thanked the driver.

Loren's lip jutted out in thought. Maybe it was wrong of her to think they were watching. Maybe all the close calls she'd encountered these past few months had made her paranoid.

This was her stop. And now that she had seen the three hellsehers leave before her, she felt more at ease about her decision to disembark.

Just as the last person exited the bus, Loren scooted out of her seat and hurried down the narrow aisle. She thanked the driver on her way out and pattered down the stairs.

Outside, the sunbaked air was fragrant with creosote and the tar-like scent of chaparral. It was oddly peaceful out here, only the distant buzzing of cicadas to break the hazy silence of a hot and sticky afternoon.

This road was as far as the transit services were willing to venture in the district of Hooded Skullcap. Not many people lived out here, and regardless, there wasn't much real estate available, thanks to the Crossroads. Whenever a Crossroads was around, the land was labeled mostly uninhabitable, though there was the odd person who enjoyed the quiet, opting to build a home near the Crossroads for this very reason. Usually, those people could afford the thickest protection spells imaginable, and they would be stupid not to pay for them if they had the money. Unless a Blood Moon hung in the sky, the Nameless were bound to a certain radius surrounding their habitats. But just because they could drift no farther than said radius didn't mean it was safe, even for the rich.

Standing on the side of the road as the bus hissed and sputtered away, Loren pretended to sift through the contents of her bag, waiting to see which route the three hellsehers from the bus would take.

As she fumbled around for something that didn't exist, she began to feel ridiculous, especially as she eyed the blade Darien had given her, hiding deep in the shadows of her bag. The three hellsehers were talking quietly, not a single one glancing her way, as they walked down the road, entirely unaware of the human girl plotting to slit their throats in self-defense. Their route would take them away from the Chalk Door, toward one of the sparse neighborhoods in this

district.

Good riddance. Maybe they lived out here.

Maybe she was the crazy one.

She lifted the strap of her purse over her head, pulled it tight across her body, and began picking her way through the knee-high grass, keeping her eyes peeled for witch's vine. She made quick work, aware of the sun inching toward the horizon with every passing second, taking with it the small degree of safety it provided.

About an hour later, both of her bags were full of enough witch's vine to make at least a dozen tonics. She zipped her purse shut, the herbs getting stuck in the metal teeth, and hurriedly made her way back. One last bus would be coming out here before nightfall, and if she didn't catch it, she would be screwed. Taxis were always an option, but only if they weren't already booked, like that night when she'd gone clubbing with Dallas and Sabrine at Her Infernal Majesty.

Loren shuddered from the thought. She picked up her pace, dry grass crackling against her legs. Life had changed a lot since that night.

She could just make out the deserted bus stop in the distance, the lone streetlight beside it flickering awake, when she froze.

It wasn't deserted at all. The three people from before were back, and they were watching her in silence from across the field.

Out here, there weren't many places for a person to hide, nor were there many places for a person to run for help. The couple of neighborhoods in the area were too far away, the trees too scarce. There were no stores, no charging stations. Nothing.

Except... There was *one* place.

Loren pivoted on a heel and made her way to the left, across the field and into the scant shelter of young velvet ash trees.

She had only ever been out here once, back when Mordred and Penelope had first hired her to work at the Mortar and Pestle, but she knew she was going the right way. She remembered the twins' warnings as if they had been uttered only yesterday, remembered the area they'd told her to stay away from, the circle around the Crossroads a dead zone for mobile phones and radio signals.

And she *had* stayed away. She'd willingly heeded their warnings, but right now, this was her only option.

She realized just how true that was as she looked over her shoulder.

The three hellsehers were coming after her. They had spaced themselves apart in a strategic pattern, forming a half-circle that would make it difficult for her to flee if she decided to turn around.

Loren's hand flew to the Avertera talisman. Her fingers fumbled across her bare skin, searching for the small gold pendant covered in

ancient runes, a closed eye in the center. Her stomach tumbled through her feet as she realized...

It was gone. She wasn't sure when it had vanished, but it must've been sometime in the past couple hours. She remembered fiddling with it during her lunch hour, and she hadn't done any activities that would've caused it to fall off, unless the clasp broke. Which meant the magic had already run out.

That seemed unusually quick. Since Kalendae, Darien had bought her four different talismans. *Four*. Why was the magic draining so quickly?

As she walked, fast as her legs would take her without breaking into a run, Loren dug around in the side pocket of her purse until she felt the warm silver in her fingertips. She palmed the two coins just as she was ducking around the trunk of a shaggy pepper tree. With light footsteps, she hurried down a small path speckled with wildflowers.

The path led to a clearing in which there was nothing save a pond lined with satiny stones. Beside that pond was a smooth wall of pale gray rock. It was tucked into the front of a grassy knoll, a door drawn into its surface with white chalk. Flowerless green plants and long golden grass hung above it, fluttering in a breeze.

The pond was thick with a build-up of algae, the stones fuzzy with moss. In the fast-fading sunlight, the water gleamed red with the past offerings of daring and desperate visitors.

Loren found a sharp rock in the grass, swiftly cut a line across her palm, and then plunked the two blood-stained coins into the water, where they drifted to the slimy bottom to join the others.

With a deep breath that somehow didn't shake, she faced the sealed door, blood sliding down her fingers.

"Let me in," she whispered. She could hear her pursuers now; they were getting closer. Loren's heart thundered, the blood in her veins buzzing with a thrilling blend of adrenaline and fear, but her words were firm as she bit out, "*Let me in, gods-damnit.*"

The chalk markings on the stone began to glow. What had only been a drawing of a door a moment ago became a real, physical entrance.

The stone door cracked open, an eerie and wordless invitation to step inside. Humid air that smelled of sun-warmed raspberry wine and fresh summer rain puffed out, wafting her in the face. It smelled so delicious, she was tempted to breathe it in.

*It's a lie*, Loren reminded herself. She stepped forward and placed her free palm against the door. *Don't forget, it's all a lie.*

She pushed the Chalk Door open and stepped inside.

## PART III

### BLOOD BATH

Channary Graves just *had* to be hosting a party, didn't she?

The House on the Pier was one of the oldest buildings in the city. It reminded Darien of the various Crossroads sprinkled throughout Terra—a place that was neither here nor there, where time meant nothing, and nightmares danced with dreams. There was a magical ambiance to the building, thanks to the sapphire roofing tiles and the arched windows whose glass was tinted the same blue, giving the feeling of being underwater to anyone who set foot inside the house.

"Can you try to calm down?" Maximus murmured as Darien rolled the car to a stop near the jagged coast. The ocean lapped against the rock, spraying the house with sea foam. "You're making me nervous."

Darien hadn't realized how hard he was gripping the steering wheel; how tightly he was clenching his jaw. "It just figures she'd decide to have company over on tonight of all nights." He forced his hands to relax, forced himself to take a steadying breath. The anger sweeping through his veins told him he'd be dealing with a Surge tonight.

The car jerked as Darien flattened the accelerator to the floor and backed up, squeezing into an empty stall between a couple flashy convertibles. When he put the gearshift in park, he nearly ripped it right off, a grinding noise that couldn't be good shredding the silence in the vehicle. He cut the engine and dimmed the headlights.

Now that the engine was quiet, the music from Channary's party floated across the driveway, the dull thumping muffled by the spells on the house and car.

Darien scanned the area one last time, searching for a motorcycle with the Reapers' logo on the sides of it.

Malakai was supposed to be here already. But when Darien had tried contacting him an hour ago, the call had gone straight to voicemail. If that Reaper ever decided to show up, Darien would have trouble not tearing his head off his shoulders.

Max swore. Now, it was *his* turn to make Darien nervous.

"What?" Darien asked.

"Is that Lionel's car?"

Darien followed Max's line of sight to the dark gray sedan parked near the front doors, the blue lanterns mounted on the exterior walls of the house reflecting in the spotless paint.

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Just fucking peachy," he muttered.

A while had passed since the last time he'd seen Lionel Savage. As former Right Hand of Randal Slade, Lionel had never liked Darien, but there was no surprise there. No one his father put in charge had spent a single day in Darien's good books.

"You want to come back another time?" Max's voice punctured the tension that had taken hold of Darien's thoughts.

With a sigh so heavy it was nearly a growl, Darien cracked open his door, salty air sweeping into the car. "I didn't just waste the past forty-five minutes to get here." He jerked his head at the house. "Let's go."

They made their way across the driveway. Darien recognized a few vehicles, some of them belonging to the Vipers, a few to Darkslayers who were visiting from out of town.

A cold wind blew off the ocean, rattling the shutters on the windows.

Darien blinked his Sight into place and did a once-over of his surroundings, checking for anyone who might be lurking behind the mossy rock wall spanning the coast, or the pin oaks sheltering parts of the old road. The deep orange rays of a setting sun bled across the ocean.

They'd almost made it to the towering front doors of the House on the Pier when those doors groaned open, and he and Max found themselves face-to-face with Lionel Savage and his son Harley. At Harley's side was Valary Sternberg, gripping the Huntsman's tattooed arm with red-painted claws. The glaze of her eyes suggested she'd had a little too much to drink tonight.

Harley and Lionel didn't appear too sober themselves, which meant tonight might go really, *really* badly.

Lionel was the first to speak, his words all for Darien, dark eyes glinting with hate. "You want to tell me what the fuck you're doing here?" he growled, square jaw flexing under his dark beard.

"I could ask you the same thing," Darien replied coolly. He glanced at Valary, who looked torn between feeling enraged by his presence and surprised by it. "Since when do you fuck with Wargs?" he said to Lionel.

"That's none of your business."

"If your business isn't mine, then mine isn't yours. Step aside."

Lionel didn't budge. Neither did his son, who shared very few of his father's features. While Lionel had dark hair that was flecked with

gray, Harley's was a thick sheaf of dirty-blond, the straight locks swept up off his forehead. The only similarities between the two men was their body type—lean and strong, barely any body fat on them.

Lionel said, "I think you owe us an explanation."

"Regarding what exactly?" Darien's question was glacial.

"Your father's sudden death. The last anyone saw him, he was with you. And several days later, rumors of his death start to spread. You'd better hope you've got a believable alibi—"

"Or what?" Darien seethed, lurching up close to Lionel. The Huntsman tensed, lifting his chin.

"Watch it." Harley's arm shot out, bumping Darien in the chest.

Darien snarled in his face, "*Don't fucking touch me.*" His attention went back to Lionel, who wore a small smile. "I would save your threats for someone you can beat in a fight, Lionel."

Amusement played on his mouth. "Are you challenging me?"

Darien's blood electrified with adrenaline as he became acutely aware of a handful of shadows walking across the driveway—four Huntsmen, their hunting dog Familiars creeping along at their sides.

Max assessed the threats, hand drifting toward his hip. His eyes shone a deadly black as he called upon the stores of salt in his blood.

"You boys are outnumbered," Lionel drawled. "Best be running back to Hell's Gate now."

"It's hard to outnumber someone who can take six of your men at once," Darien replied.

"Care to prove that statement?"

Darien bared his teeth. "I'd be *thrilled*."

The Huntsmen drew closer, waiting for their signal, Familiars foaming at the mouths.

Darien kept Lionel pinned with a cold stare. "You don't want to mess with me, Lionel. I'm not a teenager anymore, and in case your memory has grown dull, I was able to hand your ass to you back then, and I can do it again now. If your men take one more step, they'll be scrubbing your blood off the ground while you meet my father in hell."

Lionel's smirk merely grew.

Three seconds passed. Three.

And then the hunting dogs were leaping for their throats.

Bandit and Grim were out instantly, dog and mountain lion bursting out of their shadows in blurs of black mist, barks and growls ripping through the night. Familiars collided in midair with a clash of teeth and claws, smashing into the front steps and the hedges near the house just as two of Lionel's men were upon Darien and Max.

By the time Max had disarmed the one, cracking his head against the steps, Darien had flipped the other over his shoulder, throwing



him to the ground so hard the pain rendered the Huntsman instantly useless.

During that time, Lionel didn't even get his weapon drawn. And just as the Huntsman was reaching for the gun, realizing his cocky mistake at last, Darien had Harley by the throat, a knife pressed to his jugular.

Valary staggered away from the blade with a strangled gasp and bumped into the closed front door.

All movement, Huntsmen and Familiar, ceased.

When Darien spoke, his voice was the only sound in the area. "Call off your men, or your son dies."

Tense silence spread among the group. Hands hovered near weapons, the eyes of everyone present turning cool with calculation.

Darien pressed the blade into Harley's skin, drawing blood. The Huntsman winced as a drop of red slid down his throat, his pulse thrumming near knifepoint. Darien drawled, "I'm not bluffing."

"I would do as he says if I were you," came a lilting female voice. Darien turned to see Christa appearing from the side of the house, heels clicking on cobbles. As she passed under a light, her sable hair shone navy-blue, her intense gaze reserved for Lionel and Harley. "Channary agreed to meet with him tonight. You wouldn't want to make her wait when she's got plenty of important things to do, would you?" The lie was delivered so smoothly, Darien almost believed it himself.

A moment of quiet passed among their group. Lionel, Harley, and Valary assessed Darien, and he and Max assessed them back.

Finally, Lionel stepped to the side, using the hand that had been reaching for his gun to gesture to the doors instead. "After you," he drawled, the words dripping with a threat.

Darien shoved Harley aside and sheathed his blade. "Next time, bring more men," Darien said to Lionel as he passed him. "Make it a real challenge for me."

Lionel looked like he had a million things to say, but he uttered none of them.

Darien walked into the house, Max beside him, Familiars on their heels. Christa entered after them, shutting the door on the others.

"Follow me." Christa beckoned with a hand.

"Thanks," Darien said as she clipped her way down a twisting corridor lined with arched windows, the floor tinted a hypnotic blue from the glass. The place was quiet; they must be having the party out back, or maybe on one of the top floors.

Christa didn't turn. She kept walking, eyes fixed on the crackling fireplace in the centre of the room up ahead. "It's the least I can do." Her voice was guarded. Darien thought he knew her well enough to

tell that the tension in her voice was due to anxiety and not anything he'd done, not even how cold he had been to her at the Devil's Advocate.

The house groaned as waves crashed against it, sea foam and clumps of marine plants splashing the windows. The place was drafty and smelled of brine, citrus, and wet wood.

They'd made it to the living room when three big men stepped in their path, all of them hellsehers, all of them Pawns.

"Where do you think you three are going?" said the one in the middle.

Christa opened her mouth to speak, but the one on the left said, "If you say one word, we'll have you *and* your sister thrown out, new girl."

Darien smirked. Those were big words for a Pawn.

Max said, "We're here to see Channary. Think she can spare us a few minutes of her time?"

"We didn't ask you," the man said without looking at Max, his eyes all for Darien.

"We're here to see Channary," Darien repeated, amusement coating his words as he sized up the three men blocking their path. "Think she can spare us a few minutes of her time?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Darien saw Max's mouth tilt up at the edge. He knew his best friend's love for him had reached maximum capacity from that handful of simple words.

"You'll have to come back another time," the first Pawn said. "The boss is busy, and she doesn't take kindly to unsolicited scum."

Darien said, "Too bad you were late to the show, or you wouldn't be standing in my way right now."

Max was smiling. "They haven't seemed to figure out that Wargs only use men for their dicks, not as business partners."

The Pawns made to lunge—

"That'll be enough," rang out a sharp female voice, clear as bells, the sound of it instantly stilling the three men.

A tall Warg with an hourglass figure stood near the crackling fireplace, wrapped up in a black silk dress that trailed on the floor behind her. Thrown across her shoulders was a white wolf pelt, its lifeless eyes redder than blood. Her sleek hair dripped down her back like weeping cherries, the color stark against her wolf fur.

Darien nodded in greeting. "Channary."

She dipped her chin in return, the gesture so subtle it could barely be classified as a greeting. "Darien. Maximus. It's been a long time."

"We've come to make you an offer, if you're willing to hear it."

A hum floated up from deep in her lungs. "You're not the first this evening."

“Lionel beat us to it?” Max dared.

“I’m afraid he hasn’t had a chance to speak with me yet.” What a goddamn lie. She beckoned with a wave of fingernails that were filed into curled claws. “Hurry it up. The night is wasting, and I am tired.”

Darien glanced at Christa, who gave him a subtle nod. This was where she would part with them.

Channary led the way through the house, down a maze of creaky corridors. The many doors they passed were shut. Candles flickered in sconces, dripping wax onto floorboards that were in desperate need of being ripped out and replaced.

When they reached a staircase, the structure as narrow as it was steep, they ascended the steps to the third floor. Channary’s office was the fifth door down, perpetually guarded by two Pawns. She didn’t acknowledge either of them as she swung open the door and strutted inside.

The walls were crowded with shelves of books and ornaments, not a gap to be seen. A desk sat near a bay window, the peeling frames providing a striking view of the ocean, where a swiftly setting sun flaunted its orange reflection on the choppy waters.

Tightening her wolf pelt around her shoulders, Channary sank into the chair behind the desk, crossed her legs, and sparked a cigarette. She smoked it from a long silver cigarette holder, an antique that kept her clothes from getting covered in ash and made her look like she’d stepped out of a bygone era.

“Alright, Darien,” she crooned, breathing a stream of smoke at the ceiling. “Let’s hear it. This better be worth my time.”

“Randal’s dead,” he began, getting right to the point.

“I am aware. And I’m assuming you’re here to flaunt your newfound riches and status in my face.”

“I come with an offer.” Channary canted her head. “I was recently informed that we have a new problem on our hands, and I would like your help, if you are willing to offer it. The MPU is looking to take down the arms trade that Randal and his men were involved with, and if we don’t help them do it, they’ll put us behind bars. All of us.”

“All of us?” Channary trilled a cold, disbelieving laugh. “Every Darkslayer house in the city? You’ve got your panties all in a bunch for nothing, Darien.” Silver-blue eyes raked over his form. “You’re young. You weren’t around to see the rest of us fight for our status. A few disgruntled detectives aren’t anything new to us.”

“Maybe not,” Darien said. “But I have no interest in serving time in Blackwater or Darkwater. To use your words, I am young, and I don’t wish to spend the better part of my life rotting behind bars.”

She didn’t need to know the truth—that the MPU was the least of his concerns, and it was Gaven Payne and his men who’d personally

threatened him, his family, and his home. The more allies he had on his side, and the less people he had standing in his way or attempting to take him down themselves, the better. No matter how much he hated speaking with this woman.

And no matter how much he hated pretending to ally with her.

Channary snickered, still more amused than she should be. “They *would* put us in Blackwater, wouldn’t they?” She tapped the ash off her cigarette. “Who told you all this?”

“That’s confidential. The most I can tell you is there’s a new Head Detective in charge of their operations, and he isn’t a fan of Darkslayers.”

The Warg put out her cigarette in the glass ashtray, then balanced the holder in the notch in the rim. She leaned forward, lacing her white fingers on the desk. “Let me get this straight.” Her voice was as smoky as the stream of gray curling out of the ashtray. “You have received a warning about the MPU wanting to throw us behind bars, so you would like my help in taking down these dealers.”

“Correct.” He would never ask for her help, not unless he really needed it. He didn’t trust her enough for that. What he really wanted was to assert his claim over his father’s seat and douse any of the plans she’d been stoking. Lionel’s presence here was a concern; clearly, they were in cahoots, which was a first.

“And where’s this offer you mentioned? What do I get in return?”

“You want your house at the top of the hierarchy,” Darien began.

That cold smile spread. “How very observant of you.”

“I’m here to offer you something better. How would you like Randal’s former position as Head of all houses?”

She eyed him with cold assessment. “You’re speaking of his position as if it is yours to hand off.” Of course she would toe the line and see how much belittling he would tolerate.

“It is mine. I am Randal Slade’s son and successor. His title isn’t up for grabs, it belongs to *me*—” Darien jabbed his chest. “—until I decide to offer it to someone else. And unless you’d like to see a cut in your wages, and your house moved to the bottom tier, I would rethink your next move. That goes for Lionel as well.”

Her stare turned hostile. “What does Lionel have to do with this?”

“You think I don’t know why he’s here? You think I don’t know that you two have been going head to head for years, yet he’s here at your house tonight like you’re thick as fucking thieves?”

“His presence here is a protection. No one’s had any idea what to expect since Randal died. Can you really blame me for seeking out strength from the other houses?”

“I guess we’re even, then.” There was a question in her eyes. Darien clarified, “Because I’ve made some allies of my own. You

already know of the Vipers and the Angels, but I've added another to the list."

With a wide, disbelieving gaze, she glanced about the room, every movement mocking. "And where is Malakai Delaney now? You expect me to believe you managed to earn back his favor?"

"Don't believe me, that's fine. But if you make one move against me or my Devils, you will be making a move against the Reapers, the Vipers, *and* the Angels of Death."

Max, seeing the deliberation on Channary's face, added, "Not exactly good odds for you, are they?" Bandit huffed a laugh.

Channary was still evaluating Darien. "I'm supposed to believe that you would be willing to hand over your title, and for such a low cost? What are you really getting out of this deal?"

"Freedom," he said. "I want out of Darkslaying. Not now, but soon."

"How very interesting." Her eyes glinted with curiosity. "While the foolish part of me is inclined to believe you, I must admit this is a lot to ask, kiddo. Especially to base my decision off some weak promise that you will hand me Randal's seat." Those snakelike eyes narrowed. "Exactly when would that happen?"

"Within the year."

The Warg was unable to hide the intrigue that flickered across her face. "Within the year," she repeated, her tone dubious.

Darien grabbed her silence by the horns and ran with it. "In the meantime, I'll up your profits. When I'm out, you can have it. All of it."

"And what of your Devils?" She looked at Max. "How are *you* going to feel when your precious crown is handed over by your leader? Or are you in on his bullshit too?"

"He's my leader for a reason," Max replied, the words coming impressively smoothly for someone who hadn't been entirely filled in on how this conversation would go tonight. "I stand behind him, no matter what he chooses."

Channary thought it through. "You say you want out, but I'm more than a little reluctant to trust you. Randal was a weasel, and even though I hated him, I acknowledge that he was smart, and he raised a couple of smart kids. How do I know you're not a weasel like him?"

"I hated my father. I still hate his rotting guts, and he's not even around to piss me off anymore. Help me out with this, and none of us will end up behind bars. I'll have my window of power, and then I'll hand it off to you for as long as you so please. By then, it won't be my business anymore what the fuck you do with it."

Silence fell. Wind howled like a wolf outside.

"I would ask why you suddenly want out, but I feel like the only

answer I'll get is some bullshit lie."

"My reasons for wanting to leave don't concern you. With Randal now gone, I have an opportunity to re-evaluate my life after having him at the helm for over twenty-four years, and if my decision benefits you, then you don't need to concern yourself with it." Darien lifted a dark brow. "Am I right, or am I right?"

She merely watched him, her expression betraying nothing, but he could sense that the conversation had swung in his favor. Her aura had mellowed; she was putty in his hands, just like anyone who devoted their lives to the never-ending rat race for money and status. She might not trust him, but she was clearly desperate enough for the top rung of the ladder that she was willing to chance it.

Maybe she had her own ideas up her sleeve, but it didn't matter. If she ever tried anything, he'd cut off her fucking head.

"So, what do you say?" Darien prompted. "Can we work together on this, or are we going to have to fight it out?"

Channary stood. She rounded the desk, every movement exuding grace. For a minute, they faced each other in silence.

And then Darien offered the leader of the Wargs a hand. "Deal?"

She clasped it, holding his gaze. "Deal." Tightening her grip, she leaned in close to his face, her eyes glinting with the shifter magic coursing through her wolf pelt. "You play me for a fool, Darien, I'll destroy everything you care about."

Darien gave her a wicked smile, his eyes flashing with a threat of his own. "Likewise."

Channary let go. With a graceful wave of her hand, she drawled, "Get out of here. I have a party to attend."

Darien crossed the room, Max at his side, Familiars moving soundlessly at their heels.

He stopped when he reached the door, remembering that he still had something he needed to cross off his list. "One more thing."

Channary cocked her head in question.

"It's about Valary Sternberg."

Beyond the Chalk Door was the gold—bright habitat of a creature born from shadow.

The walls were made of intricately carved bone, each design flecked with gold. Nestled in the many grooves were thousands of colorful flowers. They wept a sticky sap that dripped to the floor, their saccharine scent warping the air like a desert mirage. The edges of the flower petals were gilded, as if someone had plucked them, dipped them in liquid gold, then carefully reattached them.

They were beautiful. But beautiful things could be deadly too.

Loren felt detached from her body. Her eyelids were leaden and tingly, her limbs cumbersome and boneless. The place was lit with flames glowing from chandeliers that looked like edible grapevines, fat purple berries ready to burst on branches that sagged with their weight. Pollen coated the air, the sparkling particles tickling her nose.

The sound of the Chalk Door groaning open behind her spurred her into action. A fresh wave of adrenaline coursed through her veins, allowing her to think clearer than she had been able to a moment ago.

She hurried forward, down the gilt hallway that branched out into three separate routes. All three looked identical, but she chose the left.

“Where did she go?” barked a male voice, his tongue not yet weighed down by the hypnotizing effect of this place.

Loren walked faster, cursing her human limbs for being so clumsy, so easily affected by magic.

Maybe coming in here wasn’t a good idea. Maybe hellseers weren’t affected by the lures of the Pale Man, and her plan would be in vain.

Silencing the negative voice in her head, she kept walking, refusing to believe that this was it, that she would die in a place that promised paradise but only offered hell. She’d heard plenty of stories about this place. Rumors that anyone who wandered in here and was devoured by the Pale Man would spend the afterlife trapped for eternity within these gilded walls. Entirely ignorant of the monster that ruled here, they believed they were trapped in heaven.

Footsteps slapped against the walls.

“Split up!” one of the males instructed. “Find her.” By the sound of where their footfall went afterward, she assumed they had each taken a different tunnel.

A cold chill spread across the back of her neck, the kind of feeling

that told her there was a predator tracking her movements.

*A true smorgasbord*, came a hiss of a voice.

Loren spun around, hair sticking to her sweaty forehead, but she couldn't find the source of the utterance.

The voice spoke again, this time from the opposite direction. *You will make a fine appetizer.*

She spun back the other way, looking but not seeing. Her mouth was dry, and her heart was beating out a terrified rhythm in her chest.

"Come out, little human," said a male hellseher, the words reverberating off the walls. Judging from the volume, he was only several feet away. "The longer you delay, the harder it'll be for you."

Loren held her breath. She backed into a shadowed cranny between two marble pillars, wedging her body in tight. Carefully, she reached into her bag and drew the dagger Darien had given her shortly after Kalendae, a vicious thing with a handle of bone, skulls carved into it. She gripped it tight, her hand surprisingly steady as she waited, banking on the magic in this place to conceal her aura from those who hunted her.

As she waited, the spells lulled her into a relaxed state, and her eyelids began to droop. She fought the magic, blinking rapidly, her sweat—slick grip on the dagger tightening. The feet of the approaching man had slowed to dragging, and when he spoke again his words were slurred.

"Where're you hiding, dumb cunt?" He sounded drunk. A rock clacked against the wall, likely kicked by his clumsy boot. "Come out."

As soon as his shadow slanted across the floor, Loren sucked in a breath and lunged. She threw her whole weight at him, shoving him into the wall. With a grunt, he reached for her, limbs ungainly.

She sank the knife between two of his ribs, driving it up into his heart, just like Darien had taught her. Clutching his large body to her own, she slowly lowered him to the floor, arms straining under his weight. The last thing she needed was for the thud of him falling to alert the others.

As soon as his body touched ground, her heartrate slowed. It turned faint, as if she were falling into a very deep sleep. The last of her strength left her body, and she could not even find the will to extract the blade from the man's side.

The Pale Man spoke to her in a croon. *He was supposed to be mine*, he said. Disappointment clung to every word. *You are next.*

Loren's feet started moving. She staggered deeper into the corridor, using the walls to keep from falling down, her limbs useless rubber. It was hot as a sauna in here. Sweat beaded on her face and trickled down her spine, turning her skin hot and itchy.



A bloodcurdling scream shook through the den.

Loren whirled, stumbling over her own feet. She caught herself against a wall just as the crack of bone and the slurp of something wet drifted down the corridor.

"I thought you said I was next," she slurred. Bile pooled on her tongue. She swallowed it down, eyes burning with the need to shut, tracks of perspiration trickling over her lips. The salt of it coated her parched tongue and made her thirsty.

The only reply to her statement was the gluttonous sound of chewing and cracking bone.

Loren leaned against the wall and turned her face into the carved bone. Sleep was calling her name, and her legs were sagging.

There was a flower at eyelevel. A black flower that vaguely resembled a spider. The bulb of pollen nestled in its centre was red as a cherry.

It was Spiderdrop, a plant known to fight hallucinations and drive a fever out of a person's body.

A hand reached out in front of her, grazing the velvety petals, so soft and smooth. Loren barely recognized the hand as her own.

She plucked the bud off the wall.

That was when her legs gave out. She slid to the floor, the stem of the flower pinched between weak fingers, the wall scraping her cheek as she leaned her whole weight against it. With one last effort to save her own life, she put the flower in her mouth and chewed.

The taste of it was a cross between black licorice and maraschino cherries. It made her feel sick, but she swallowed it all.

Three minutes passed. Three minutes, and she was able to open her eyes, no longer weighed down by magic spells. She could think and see clearly, but it was still boiling hot in here, the moisture pulling on her lungs. The blonde hairs on her arms stuck to her damp skin, and her clothes were soaked through.

*Rainbow Phoenix*, hissed the Pale Man as Loren got to her feet. *That explains why you are so smart. Not a single one of my prey has ever found the Spiderdrop, let alone been intelligent enough to consume it.*

"I'm getting out of here alive." She swallowed more bile.

*Oh, you think so, do you?*

"I know so."

That was when she saw him.

The Pale Man was standing down the corridor, blocking her path to the exit. Fear stole through her at the sight of him, rooting her feet in place. A chill crawled across her skin, and her bowels turned watery.

The creature had to be almost seven feet tall. His hands were bony, fingers long and sharp, his arms nearly the same length as his legs. Grayish skin sagged off a skeletal form with webbed feet. Lethal spikes

protruded from his elbows and calves, the tips of them bright red.

The face was the worst part. A smile took up the whole bottom half, pointy teeth blackened with rot. It had slits for a nose and eyeless sockets, nothing there but smooth, near—translucent skin that was slightly dark in the centers, as if it were bruised. No hair covered its head, but it had ears that were long and tapered, the ends curved like fish hooks.

*I'll give you a three minute head start, said the creature. And then I shall have my dessert.*

The Pale Man didn't need to tell her twice.

Loren spun on a heel and ran, feet slapping on stone. There was no telling if the tunnels would take her back to the entrance, or if there was another way out, but she wouldn't give up.

Bone and flowers and pillars and gold flew by her as she sprinted, breath tearing apart her lungs, stomach roiling.

Eventually, she reached a winding staircase that led up to a second level. That level was only a small platform, the ground covered in heaps of rocks and dry bones that had been sucked clean a long time ago.

Behind the rocks was a cage—a door. A rusted padlock hung from the latch, no key in the hole.

She took off up the stairs, nearly rolling her ankle on chunks of stone and skulls.

When she got to the top, she started digging. If she could clear these rocks away, she might be able to break the lock off and climb the narrow tunnel up through the earth. A fresh breeze blew down that tunnel, kissing her skin, a promise of life waiting on the other side.

Her fingernails broke and bled as she dug at the rocks. They clacked at her feet and rolled into her shins, bruising them.

*Rainbow Phoenix, Rainbow Phoenix, I can smell you.* The Pale Man's voice floated down the corridor near the bottom of the stairs. It was getting louder. *Why must you attempt to escape, Rainbow Phoenix? Don't you want to play with me?*

She dug faster, cutting her palms on sharp edges, every action desperate. She barely felt the pain. Her heart thundered in her chest, and a small voice in the back of her mind whimpered that there were too many rocks. She wanted to tell the voice that it was wrong and stupid and didn't know anything, but she knew the truth.

There was no way she was getting out of here alive.

*Found you.*

Loren froze. She lowered her hands—one still clasping a rock, the end of it tapered into a wicked point—and prepared to turn around. She could feel the Pale Man's attention on her, could hear his bated

breathing that reeked of rotting flesh and blood. Hair clung to her sweaty face as she turned...

The Pale Man was watching her from the bottom of the stairs. He must've sensed that she had turned, because a smile that showed all the hideous teeth in his too-wide mouth was plastered to his face, stretching all the way out to his ears. A black tongue that was full of scales pushed through the spaces between his teeth, a thick liquid that looked like chewed—up black licorice dribbling down his chin.

*Would you like to hear a secret?*

"No." She was trembling now—she couldn't help it—but her voice was firm and loud.

*But I tell all my visitors a secret before I kill them.*

"Get it over with, then." She gripped the rock tight, ignoring the pain of the wounds in her palm splitting wider, bits of gravel digging into tender flesh.

*Oh, do allow me to share it. It is a very good secret. I speak in riddles; it makes it more fun.*

"Get it over with already." She closed her eyes, willing her magic to lend her a hand. She'd worked miracles on Kalendae; maybe her power could help her again.

With her eyes closed, she waited.

But when the creature began to speak, all her concentration evaporated.

*The Devil will die.*

Loren's heart lurched. Her stomach became a twisted knot.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

*The Devil will die*, the Pale Man said again. *Three magpies take to the sky, the Devil will die.*

"What did you say?" Loren said through her teeth, heart stumbling over two beats. "Who are you talking about?"

The thing kept smiling at her, bone—white gums bleeding. Blood and more thick black liquid oozed through the gaps between serrated teeth.

"Who are you talking about?" she demanded.

*That must be my easiest riddle yet*, the Pale Man replied. *I believe you know exactly who I mean.*

"Take it back." The words were gasps squeezed out of her lungs.

*It is time for me to kill you now.* He lurched down onto his hands and knees, joints popping as they pointed outward. *And you will taste so delectable, Rainbow Phoenix. While your flesh smells of one thing, your soul smells of another. It is cedar fires and violet water. Mouth—watering.*

*"Take it back!"*

The Pale Man charged.

Loren kept shouting. She didn't budge, and the longer she stood

there, the less afraid she felt.

“TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK!” Her voice shifted into a shriek that rattled her eardrums as the creature barreled closer. “TAKE IT BAAAAAACK!”

When he reached the top of the stairs and leapt for her throat, she whirled, dropped to her knees, and covered her ears.

The next word tore out of her, shaking the den, sending rocks clattering down the stairs. “STTTTOOOOOOOOOOOOOOPPPPPPP!”

Silence filled the room. Silence and stillness. It was so quiet, she could hear the blood in her veins, throbbing with every heartbeat, the only indication that she wasn’t dead.

Taking her hands off her ears, she turned her head, looked up...

The Pale Man was frozen in midair, clawed hands outstretched toward her—only inches from her face, so close she could see the lines crisscrossing the scaly palms. The creature wasn’t blinking, wasn’t breathing. Droplets of sweat ran down his temples, where veins bulged against transparent skin.

It was as if time had stopped.

Still in a crouch, Loren sidled out from under the Pale Man, careful not to let her head touch his hands.

As she fled, she looked back. Only once, when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

The Pale Man still hadn’t moved, as if only his clock had stopped while the rest of the world went on moving.

They were out of the House on the Pier and halfway across the driveway when Max grabbed Darien by the arm, breaking through his concentration, just like a new Surge was attempting to do. His brain was swelling in his skull, and his skin was beginning to get that crawling feeling that made him want to claw it off.

*“Are you out of your damn mind?”* Max hissed in his face. “You just offered Channary the same thing you offered Malakai!”

“I’m aware of that. And keep your voice down, would you?” Darien shrugged him off and kept walking.

Max followed on his heels. “They could talk, Darien. Sooner or later, one of them is going to spill the beans, and then what? What do you plan on doing when it’s not just the MPU, Payne, and the Huntsmen that want your head, but also Delaney and Graves?”

“That won’t happen.”

There was true fear in Max’s next words, a sound Darien seldom heard. “You’re not thinking straight.”

Darien whirled to face him, nearly causing his best friend to slam into him. “I’ve never thought straighter than I am now. You *need* to trust me on this, Maximus.”

Max’s jaw worked as he searched for the right words. “What’s the real plan? And don’t fucking water it down for me.”

“Exactly what I just said in that room.”

“And you really want out of Darkslaying?”

“Yes. No.” He scrubbed his hands over his face, rings digging into the bridge of his nose. “Maybe,” he sighed.

“And who would you give the power to if you left it behind?”

“Malakai,” he admitted.

Max’s face sank, his eyes turning hard and cold as glass. “So that wasn’t a lie.”

“No, that part was very true.” But he didn’t expect Max to understand, not yet. He didn’t expect any of them to. None of them had seen this coming, not even himself.

“Why him?” Max breathed. “What about us?”

“I told you not to worry, Maximus. And besides, that’s a long way off. So quit thinking about it, will you? Quit thinking about it and just fucking trust me. Because I’ve got a lot on my plate right now and I could really use my best friend behind me instead of throwing

questions at me a mile a minute.”

Silence. Max watched him as trees creaked and water broke against the coast, his expression conflicted. A brackish breeze stirred their hair and whipped at their clothes. Darien breathed it in, willing it to ground him. Moisture glutted his lungs and chilled him to his core, but it was a welcome feeling in the heat of the impending Surge.

Finally, Max nodded. “Okay.”

“We good?”

He nodded again, though a muscle feathered in his jaw. “Yeah. Yeah, I trust you.”

They clasped hands. “Good.” Darien yanked him into a half-hug, clapping him on the back. When he let go, he kept a hand on Max’s shoulder and looked him dead in the eyes. “I care about you and the others more than I could ever express. Trust—that’s all I’m asking for.”

Max searched his face. It killed Darien to see the reluctance lingering there, no matter how subtle. “I trust you.”

The hollow clack of heels on cobblestones had them both turning toward the house.

Valary was strutting toward them, her thick hair blowing behind her like a flame in the wind. Her face was scarlet, her features contorted with rage. Channary had already stripped her of her pelt; the absence of the wolf fur made her body look tinier than usual, the skin of her bare arms and shoulders covered in tiny bumps from the chill in the air.

Shit. Darien had hoped to be far away from this place before this happened. The sight of her was enough to make the threat of his Surge increase tenfold, colors shimmering at the edges of his vision.

“Congratulations, Darien!” she fumed, the echo of her words volleying sharply against the old buildings lining the road. “You just got me excommunicated.”

“That was kind of the point.”

“You’re a fucking asshole!” she spat.

“And you’re a fucking *bitch*.” Darien’s hands curled into fists.

Valary crossed her arms. “Really?” she scoffed, an aggravating half-smile on her lips.

All Darien could see in that moment was this Warg threatening Loren, cornering her in his goddamn dining room, as if she owned the place. This bitch’s head would look a lot better ripped off her shoulders and mounted on his wall. “You entered my house without permission and mentally assaulted my girl. So yeah, *really*.”

The Warg arched a brow. “Your girl,” she scoffed. A cluck of her tongue raked across Darien’s skin. “*Right*. As if I’m supposed to believe that your flimsy relationship is going to last. It’s not my fault she

couldn't handle seeing the truth—"

"What you and I had was *nothing*," Darien snarled, closing the distance between them with three pounding strides. Max kept pace with him, watching in case he had to intervene—in case Darien's Surge pushed him to do something he didn't mean to do. "It was cold and empty sex. If you think that gives you some sort of claim over me, you are dead wrong."

"That's fine." Valary sneered up at him. "Go ahead and think that—I don't care. But you've always had commitment issues, Darien. And you're kidding yourself if you think that you can suddenly change. I mean, *look* at you." She waved a hand in his general direction, as if everything could be explained by his appearance alone. Darien felt his jaw tighten as she looked him over from head to toe, her stare like the scalding touch of fiery coals. "Claiming Randal's throne after you said you would get out of slaying the first chance you got."

Darien's arms trembled, his blood shifting from a simmer to a rolling boil. With a baring of his teeth, he hissed, "You don't know me at all."

The Surge wasn't knocking anymore—it was pounding. Banging on his skull until it cracked open and bled, ripping his thoughts into a shredded pulp that scattered into the wind.

Valary continued, "I *do* know that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. You're a mirror image of your disgusting, *loser* father—"

"**GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!**" Darien's voice was a roar that clapped through the night. Valary flinched, but he didn't care. "**NOW!**" The blood in his head was louder than his voice. His whole body was trembling like he was being tased as a Surge ripped his soul apart, leaving no part of it untouched. He couldn't breathe.

He. Could. Not. Breathe.

"This isn't over," the Warg stammered. She was barely more than a flickering aura as the Sight replaced his regular vision.

Darien felt, more than he saw, Max step up to his side. "You're threatening the wrong person, girl."

"Whatever." Valary turned and marched away. The words she muttered were nothing but insults that bounced across the driveway, each one amplified by the Surge.

The world was too big. The ground swelled toward his knees, and when he stared out at the ocean, he felt detached from reality, a bubble bobbing through a dream. His breath was coming in shallow gasps that made his lungs feel stretched out, and he couldn't blink away the black.

"You want me to drive?" Max asked.

Darien didn't hesitate to reach into his jacket pocket, nearly ripping the stitching as he fished the keys out and tossed them to Max.

So much for going back home. He couldn't go to Loren now, not without draining some of this rage from his system. It was too dangerous—he wouldn't chance it.

There was a motorcycle ripping down the street toward them, the deep bass rumble of the engine thundering through the night. The sight of the bike caused the bestial storm of Darien's anger to crackle with a warning—the kind he usually heeded by getting far away from anyone he even remotely cared about.

But it didn't matter this time, because this was exactly the thing he needed, and it was being served to him on a silver platter.

"That Malakai?" Max's question floated to Darien, but he was so lost, he barely heard it.

Darien stalked out into the dark road, stepping right in the motorcycle's swift path. The screeching of tires shredded the air as the driver attempted to downshift, braking so frantically the back wheel caught on loose gravel and fishtailed.

As soon as the bike skidded close enough, tires squealing, the whole vehicle lurching, Darien grabbed hold of the handlebars.

With an angry roar, he whipped the vehicle to the left, throwing it across the road.

The motorcycle and its rider flew through the air and struck the ground with an ear-splitting *crunch* that ripped through the silent night, the engine shutting off from the collision. Horns blared and lights flashed as several car alarms in the area were triggered by the disturbance.

Darien was moving before Malakai had finished spinning. Bits of metal and the pieces of a shattered headlight clattered across the ground.

Malakai had just pushed himself to his feet, leather jacket and jeans torn and full of gravel, when Darien reached him.

"You *fucking* asshole!" Darien drove his fist into the Reaper's nose.

Malakai shouted out, blood misting the air. He fell to the ground and landed on his shoulder.

Darien jumped on top of him, pinning him down with a knee to the chest. He started hitting, the thud of his fist on the Reaper's flesh mixing with the shrieking and blaring of car alarms. He was vaguely aware of Max shouting at his back, pulling on his jacket, trying to get him off Malakai, but Darien didn't budge, and his fist just kept flying, rings tearing into Malakai's face.

It took him several hits before he realized Malakai wasn't fighting back. Darien froze mid-strike, bloody fist raised.

"Hit me, you stupid fuck," Darien growled.

"I'm not fighting," Malakai gritted out.

"Why not?" He grabbed him by the collar, pulling his head up off



the ground so he could snarl in his face, “*Where were you?*”

Malakai spat a mouthful of blood onto the road. “I was at the hospital,” the Reaper panted.

“What for? You don’t look sick.”

“It’s Jewels.” Malakai winced in pain. Some of that pain didn’t look like the physical kind. Moisture shone in his eyes, the sight of it loosening Darien’s fist. He’d never seen him like this, not once. Another wince preceded Malakai’s next sentence. “She’s dying.”

Shit.

Darien stood, pulling Malakai up with him. He backed up a couple paces and waited for the Reaper to speak. Malakai took a minute to compose himself, looking at nothing but the ground, hands trembling faintly at his sides.

“She’s sick,” Malakai panted. He swallowed, looking like he wanted to puke. “She was diagnosed with the Tricking about a month ago. I saw the signs for some time, but I was hoping it wasn’t true. She barely uses her magic, Darien. She’s smarter than that. She barely uses her magic, and she *still* got sick.” Hard green eyes settled on Darien’s face, hatred for the Tricking simmering within. “How is that fair?”

“It’s not,” Darien bit out. “I’m sorry, man.”

Malakai had the same kind of bond with Jewels that Darien had with Ivyana. They’d all grown up with home lives that were less than savory. While Malakai’s dad had been nothing like Randal, his mother and stepdad were real pieces of work, tyrants and bullies whose ways had only worsened after their biological father passed away. For eighteen years, Malakai had sheltered Jewels the same way Darien had sheltered Ivy, and as soon as they were of legal age to live on their own and support themselves, Malakai had pulled his sister out of the water they were drowning in and built his own shore.

Malakai waved away the apology. “Don’t be sorry, you had no clue.” He glanced about, chest still rising with frantic breaths, his attention snagging on the House on the Pier.

Darien turned to see a handful of Wargs and Huntsmen watching from the front steps. Among the group were Lionel and Lumen, one of Channary’s daughters.

They’d seen the whole thing.

“Well,” Darien sighed. “You were late as hell, but you somehow managed to still get the job done.”

Malakai gave him a small smile that showed the blood staining his teeth. “There’s nothing like an explosive entrance.” He turned and made for his bike. “I’ve gotta roll. Got a couple blondes waiting for me back at the house.” He gave a lazy wave. “Catch you dickheads later.”

“Same ones as the other night?” Darien asked.

“Course not.” Malakai tossed a crooked grin over his shoulder.

"You know me better than that." He picked the bike up off the ground.

Max said, "How about swapping the blondes for a redhead?"

Malakai was shaking his head at the busted headlight and the scratched paint. He muttered a string of curse words, propped up the bike, and shook the tangled hair out of his face. "Huh?" He gave Max a blank expression. "Who are you talking about?"

Darien shared a glance with Max. "That's pretty sad if you're that clueless," Darien said.

Malakai blinked. "Aspen?"

A low whistle slipped through Max's lips. "Boy, you sure are dumb."

"Aspen doesn't feel that way about me," the Reaper insisted, swinging a leg over the bike.

Max shared another look with Darien. "And my name's not Maximus Reacher."

Malakai waved them away. "Stay out of my business." He fired up the bike, engine rumbling to life.

"Thanks for showing up," Darien called over the noise.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Call me when you need me, and not a second sooner. Got it?" He was ripping the bike down the street before they could reply.

The sound of it nearly drowned out the buzz of Darien's phone in his pocket. He hurried to get it out before it could go to voicemail, answering as soon as he saw his sister's name on the screen.

"Ivy," he said. "What's going on?"

"Loren called me at the end of her shift to let me know she was heading to Hooded Skullcap to get some herbs." The name *Hooded Skullcap* spurred Darien's heart into a sprint. "She said she would be out of there by sundown, but she isn't answering her phone."

"Shit." He headed for his car, Max at his side, probably hearing the whole conversation. He gestured for Max to give him back the keys. Now that the black was out of his eyes, if only temporary, Max promptly tossed them into his waiting hand. "I'm heading there now."

"Jack and I just finished with a collection in the National, but if you need us for anything—"

"It's fine, I'm closer than you." He was already in the car, Max hurrying into the passenger's seat. "Thanks, Ivy."

He hung up and gunned it down the coast, pushing the car as fast as it could go as he raced toward the district of Hooded Skullcap.

Night had fallen, heavy and hushed.

Loren spotted the bus stop glowing in the distance, a beacon declaring safety. A smattering of stars poked through the black sky, and far above the city, the forcefield shimmered. A three-quarter moon was out, making it slightly easier to see as she picked her way across the field, taking care not to trip on the bumps and hollows in the earth.

She knew she had left the dead zone when she felt her phone vibrating in her bag with an incoming call.

Loren dug it out from under her wallet, eyes glazed with distraction, every movement mechanical. Her mind still spun with the reality of what just happened on the other side of the Chalk Door, but when she saw his name flashing across the screen, she forced the whirlwind of her thoughts to assemble. With a swipe of her thumb, she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hi, Darien.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

Loren swallowed, willing her words to come out steady. The last thing she needed was for Darien to worry about her; he had enough problems of his own, and she would hate to add any weight to them. She had come all the way out here to *help* him, for crying out loud. How had this night gone so wrong?

“I’m fine,” she said. She kept walking, her eyes fixed on the deserted bus stop, the transport shelter illuminated by a single streetlight whose murky glow clashed with dense shadows. Grass rustled against her legs, and crickets sang a shrill tune that carried far. “I’m in Hooded Skullcap.”

“I know.” Darien’s every word was tense. “I’m tracking you.” Of course. It wouldn’t have taken him long to attempt to track her once night had fallen and he still hadn’t heard from her. Knowing he could see her with his Sight eased the last of the tension clinging to her lungs and heart. “Is there a safe place where you can wait until I get there?” She heard the faint whir of the engine in the background.

“I’m almost at the bus stop.”

“Good—stay there.”

A current of wind raked through the field, carrying the rust-like tang of blood into her airways.

Something was hunting. Feasting.

A deep voice in the background said, "We just passed Stone's End."

"Max is with me," Darien explained. It was strange; simply hearing his voice made her feel safe. For a moment she forgot she was in one of the most dangerous districts in Angelthene, an abundance of eyes watching her from the dark. "Don't leave the lights, do you hear me?"

She nodded. The scent of blood was growing stronger. "I hear you."

Darien stayed on the phone with her while she sat on the covered bench, knees tucked up to her chin, phone glued to one ear. As she waited, she thought through the events of the evening, picking her brain in search of an explanation for how she had managed to walk out of the Pale Man's golden habitat alive.

Was it her conduit—her wish? Was Tempus the Liar's magic still somehow sparking in her fingertips? The more she considered this possibility, the less it made sense. The Widow had called it a wish for a reason. When a wish was bought from a god or a higher being, that god or higher being was required to fulfill that wish when the bearer requested it. And once it was gone, it was *truly* gone. No returns, no second chances, no freebies.

So what did that mean?

"I'm going to hang up now, sweetheart." The sound of Darien's voice drifting through the speaker called her back to attention. "I see you. You're safe." He ended the call.

Headlights lit up the dirt road that stretched before the bus stop, the low growl of an engine rippling toward the treeline. Loren slid her feet off the bench as Darien's car lurched to a stop.

As soon as Darien's door opened, his bass voice filled the night. "Are you hurt?" He was out of the car and kneeling before her in a flash, taking her cold hands into his, concerned eyes scanning her face.

Max got out of the car behind him, watching for anything lurking in the gloom of the field.

"I'm fine. I just lost track of time, and I didn't realize..." Her filthy fingers swept across the empty space around her neck.

Darien frowned. "Another one." When his thumb brushed across her palm, over the puckered wound that stung so badly she nearly pulled her hand away, he glanced down, that frown deepening. "Baby, your hand."

"I had to get into the Chalk Door. I'm okay."

Fear washed across Darien's face. "The Chalk Door," he repeated.

"It was the only place to hide. And...and I lost the knife you gave me."

A muscle in his jaw fluttered. "You had to use it?"

She nodded again.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so."

He stared down at the wound again, his hand cradling hers with extra care. "Do you want me to take care of this now or at home?" He looked up at her in search of an answer, the blue of his eyes accentuated by the streetlight illuminating his face. "I have an emergency kit in the trunk."

"Home, please." She couldn't wait to get out of here.

"Okay." Gently, he pulled her to her feet, being careful not to touch the knife wound. "Let's get you home." He led her to the passenger's-side door and helped her get in the car while Max took the back. The watchful eyes of hungry creatures faded into the darkness with Darien and Max's arrival. She couldn't see the demons, but she could feel their presence, could sense them skulking near the treeline.

She didn't want to know what any of them were.

Once they were in the car, Hooded Skullcap disappearing in the mirrors, she told them everything. When she was finished, they sat in silence for a while. She waited for Darien to process everything she had said. And then, finally, he spoke.

"Do you know who was following you?"

"I have no idea," Loren said, chewing her lower lip. "I've never seen them before and they didn't have any tattoos, at least not from what I could see." While the people who'd hunted her down last year had been quite showy with the phoenix head tattoos, the whole organization had tapered off into an unsettling quiet.

Darien rubbed his chin. "I'm going to need to buy you a few talismans, so you can have a spare on you at all times." When he glanced at her, his eyes were hard with determination. "I won't let this happen again, Loren. I promise."

"You say that like it was your fault." Of course he would turn this situation into a mistake he could've avoided.

"I should've been keeping up on them more," he muttered, the glow of the dashboard highlighting his strong features with a shade of cool blue, "after how quickly the magic has been used up."

"Do you think I have anything to do with that?"

He glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, up until Kalendae, the talismans were lasting a lot longer. And then my magic disappeared until tonight."

Maximus, who was leaning between the front seats, an arm resting on the side of each one, said, "You believe you were responsible for that? For stopping the Pale Man from attacking you?"

"What else could it have been?"

The question stumped them all. Loren wished she could tell them about the tear into Spirit Terra, but when she opened her mouth, her

voice got stuck in her throat, and her tongue turned heavy and awkward.

Darien shook his head. "I don't know," he sighed. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then he reached across the car and took her hand out from between her thighs, lacing his warm fingers with hers. "Don't you worry about anything. The important thing is that you're safe." He seemed to think of something then, his brow furrowing. "What were you doing out here, anyway?"

She fidgeted. "My dad stopped by the apothecary and told me about an herb that might help you with your Surges."

"You came all the way out to Hooded Skullcap by yourself for me?"

Blonde hair fell to conceal part of her face as she ducked her head. "In my defense, I had plenty of daylight left before those people started coming after me."

"I'm not mad, Loren." His thumb brushed across her knuckles, callouses scraping. "Just don't do that again. You scared me half to death." As the car rolled to a stop at an intersection, Darien pinned her with an intense stare. "Promise?"

"I promise."

"Did the Pale Man say anything?"

Loren tried to keep her fingers that were linked with Darien's from tightening. "Mostly just threats," she whispered hoarsely. "About eating me and stuff." A chill spider-walked up her spine.

Darien let it go, but she could tell from the look on his face that he wasn't fooled. Maybe it made her a liar for not wanting to discuss the Pale Man's prediction with him, but...she didn't want to think about it.

It wouldn't come true. It couldn't. It was a lie. That awful creature was full of lies.

Loren folded her legs underneath her and rested her head against Darien's shoulder for the rest of the ride. Hands gripping his forearm, she slipped in and out of a dream, only the bouncing of the car over speed bumps or the growl of the engine pulling her back to attention before she slipped right back into the dream again.

She had stopped time. She wasn't sure how, but something told her she was better off not knowing.

—

The spoon clinked against the mug as Loren stirred the tonic, melting the glob of honey in the hot liquid. Darien stood beside her at the kitchen counter, watching her with the kind of stare that made her legs suddenly decide they didn't have bones. His hands were braced

on the counter as he leaned back against it, the sight of his corded muscle beneath inked skin briefly distracting her from her task. If she wasn't careful, she would have to wipe drool from the corner of her mouth.

"Here you go, handsome." She passed him the mug, balancing it so he could grab the handle instead of the scalding sides. "Careful, it's hot."

The smile playing on his lips told her he thought she was adorable for thinking he could be so easily harmed by a hot drink. "Thank you, sweetheart." He took the mug from her and blew on the steam. "Let's go sit down. You can pick one of your chick flicks." His eyes weren't black, but she could tell he was fighting a Surge.

She prayed with all her heart that the tonic would work.

When he held a hand out to her, she took it with her good one—the hand that wasn't wrapped in bandages like the other, courtesy of Darien's meticulous care—and followed him into the sitting room. "I don't know if we can really call them *my* chick flicks," Loren said, "when I've caught you watching them by yourself."

Darien's mouth popped open with feigned horror. "Never." With a wink, he let go of her hand and sat down on the couch. He took a sip of the tonic before setting it on a coaster on the coffee table. And then he pushed his hair back from his face and patted his thigh. "Get your cute ass in my lap right now."

She cocked an eyebrow, lips twitching. "Is that an order?"

He pointed a finger at her ass. "Ass," he said, and then pointed at his lap. "Lap. Now."

She gave him a naughty look and grabbed the remote off the coffee table. As she made to sit down on the couch—beside him, instead of where he'd told her to sit—he wound his arms around her waist and pulled her into his lap so quickly, she squeaked in alarm.

He tugged her against his solid chest, pinning her arms under his. He growled, breath sending a chill across her ear, "Don't ever do that again, or I'll tickle you till you can't breathe."

Strands of her hair clung to her face as she turned to look at him, barely able to move under his firm grip. She felt like a cocoon, and he was so close, they were sharing breaths. If she tipped her head up, just a little, she would be able to kiss him. "Is that a threat?"

His fingers dug into her sides, making her buck her hips and squeal.

"Darien, stop!"

But he kept tickling her, throwing her off his lap so he could pin her down on the couch, his body pressing against hers, his fingertips going to town on the sensitive areas below her ribs.

"Darien!" she tried, but she could barely get his name out around

her fits of laughter. "Stop, I'm going to pee my pants—"

"Say it, then." He paused his assault, fingers still poised on her sides, ready to dig back in at any second. Every muscle in her body stayed on high alert, ready to wriggle the moment he tickled her again.

"Say what?" she panted. He was hovering above her, his chest touching hers, his face so close that she could see every eyelash. She lost herself in those eyes, never wanting to move, completely forgetting all about the tickling. She loved the color of them—a shade of blue she would willingly drown herself in.

Something about the way he was looking at her made her think he was feeling the same way about her. "Say you won't do it again," he whispered, bending to pass his mouth across hers. Every breath he drew caused his chest to press into hers.

Her smile grew into a grin. "I won't do it again."

He kissed her on the nose. "Good girl."

She trailed her fingers across his belt buckle. "If the tonic doesn't work, there is something else we could do." When he didn't reply, instead prying her desperate fingers off his belt and lacing them with his, she pressed, "You can use me. I don't mind."

He frowned. "I don't like that word." A storm of discontent swept through his eyes. "How'd you even find out about that?"

She squirmed. "Jack might've let it slip that it helps when you're having a Surge." Poor Jack would probably receive an earful now.

Darien shook his head, a strand of hair falling in his face. "Fucking Jacky," he muttered, scowling up at the top floors.

"Don't get mad at him," Loren said quickly. "When he told me, we weren't even a thing."

Darien snickered. "I thought we were always a thing."

"You're worried you'll hurt me," she accused.

He buried his face in her chest with a sigh that tickled, his breath warming her shirt. "Loren—"

"You've done it with other girls." She nearly bit off her tongue as he lifted his head, eyes narrowing. "It can't be that risky—"

"You're really trying to test me right now, aren't you?" He sat up, leaving her lying there, and dragged her feet into his lap.

She tensed, toes curling. "Darien, no! Not the feet! I will kick you —"

"Relax," he said, his voice all melted honey and deep bass. "I'm giving you a foot rub." As he spoke, his thumbs dug into her sore heel in a way that made her want to groan in pleasure.

"How are you good at literally everything?" The feeling lulled her toward sleep, every muscle in her body liquefying.

Oh, it was good. So good.



As he rubbed her foot with one hand, he started clicking buttons on the remote with the other. "What movie do you want to watch?"

"You pick," she slurred, eyes shutting tight. Suddenly, she didn't care about the movie. She just cared about his hands.

If only he would put them somewhere else...

When Darien spoke, a smile colored his words. "I kind of like that one about the thief and the gang leader."

Her eyes flew open. "You watched it without me?" she gasped.

Darien was staring at the television with the most adorable smile on his face—a smile that widened into a grin at her question, that dimple showing off. "I might've started it while you were at school."

"Darien!" She thumped her head against the cushion.

"We'll start it from the beginning, and I'll rub your feet for the whole thing. How does that sound?" He found the movie and hit play.

"That sounds like sore hands for you."

He arched an inky brow at her. "My hands are pretty resilient, baby girl." After a handful of weeks spent as his girlfriend, she knew that better now than ever. And she wasn't talking about his fighting.

Loren barely made it halfway through the movie before she fell asleep on the couch, her feet in Darien's lap, his hands never tiring.

She didn't come to until he picked her up off the couch as if she weighed no more than a feather. Through heavy eyelids and a tangle of lashes, she peeked up at him to see the light of the chandelier in the entrance hall edging his strong jaw with white gold. She tucked her head in tight against his hard chest and closed her eyes again.

He took the stairs with light steps, the gentle swaying of her body in his arms rocking her back to sleep.

She was out again before her head sank into the pillow.

—

Darien had managed to contain the Surge long enough to get Loren back to Hell's Gate safely, long enough to try the tonic she had made for him, drinking every last bit of it. But as soon as she fell asleep halfway through their movie, and there was no sign of his Surge leaving him the hell alone for the night, he left the house with Max and Travis to track down their newest collections: three men who'd raped over a dozen women each.

Now, he stood in a room in the basement of Hell's Gate, Travis, Jack, and Maximus with him. There was so much blood on the floor, it would make any sane person sick to their stomach. But they themselves were sick—sick and twisted, each in their own way. It was what had initially brought them all under the same roof, their need for violence the glue holding them together. A thrill vibrated in the air

as he and his Devils stood, covered in blood, around the dying men, the pathetic warlocks begging for their lives.

The edge of his Surge had softened, but he still had a ways to go. He'd always believed his internal struggles would end with Randal's death, but instead, they'd only become worse. And every time a Surge arrived, it was no longer just the acid in his veins that he had to contend with, but also memories. Old memories he'd buried carefully with time, and when they re-emerged now, they came with a vengeance, dragging him down into the deep pit of his rotting past—back to the person he used to be, the boy who'd fought to have a normal life before the monster squatting in the back of his mind had fully consumed him.

Tonight's memory was one of the worst, and he saw it playing in his head like a movie as he willingly handed himself over to his dark side.

*Darien swore he could see the words flashing through the therapist's mind as he scanned the paper.*

*Cold.*

*Empty.*

*Flawed.*

*Scared.*

*Broken.*

*Guilt-ridden.*

*Lost.*

*Alone.*

*Weak.*

*Worthless.*

*The ten words were scrawled on a notepad. Darien had written them down last night, pressing the pen into the paper so hard, the tip had nearly busted off. The assignment had done nothing for him. The therapist had told him to write down one word each day, the best word he could think of to describe how he was feeling at the time. It was supposed to help him, but instead it had only pushed the invisible knife in his chest in deeper, twisting, spilling the last of his blood.*

*Was it possible to die of a broken heart?*

*"Only one word per day, Darien," the therapist chided. "Did you forget?"*

*Darien was fifteen. He was sitting on the sofa in the warlock's office—a hard and cold piece of furniture that reminded him of the prick in the chair across from him, a phony who only pretended to care about his clients and the demons they battled.*

*A month had passed since his mother's death. A month of daily therapy sessions, none of which had helped melt the ice of his bleeding heart.*

Useless—this was useless. Another word for him to add to his bullshit list.

*“It’s impossible for me to pick just one,” Darien mumbled. He was sitting perfectly still. His back was pressed against the couch, head down, hands clasped between his knees.*

*“How come?” the therapist asked. Darien didn’t reply. “How come?” he said again. Darien didn’t like how the man looked at him, as if he were a wild animal. A heavy sigh raked along Darien’s skin. “Darien, if you don’t talk to me—”*

*Darien shot forward on the couch, his blazing eyes half a second away from turning black.*

*“Because I feel all of this every day!” he fumed, spit flying. “Every. Single. Day.” He snatched his list from the therapist’s hands and held it in front of him, jabbing his finger onto every word he voiced. “I am cold. I am empty. I am flawed. I am scared. I am broken. I am guilt-ridden. I am lost. I am alone. I am weak.” Chest heaving, his broken heart splitting into smaller pieces, he ground out the last word, paper rustling in his shaking hands, “Worthless. See that? See? That’s what I am—I am worthless!”*

*The man stared back at him; no expression showed on his face. “You are not any of those things—”*

*His hand crumpled the whole notepad into a ball. With flared nostrils, angry tears shining in his eyes, he ground out, “How can you possibly know what I am?”*

*That was the last session he’d ever attended. Words didn’t work for him; only fists did. Pain, whether it was inflicted or felt. He clung to his coping mechanisms like they were a life raft. They didn’t keep him alive, not really, but they kept him afloat. And that was better than nothing.*

Darien blinked away the memory.

Picking up a crowbar from the assortment of weapons spread across the table, he prepared to end these fuckers until nothing was left of them but scraps. They would never hurt anyone again.

Twenty-four years old, and this was still his coping mechanism, still his means of staying afloat in a world that was bent on drowning him.

He thought of nothing as he let loose on one of the targets, ignoring the desperate whimpers the three of them uttered, begging for their worthless lives, entirely forgetting about the lives they’d taken, the women they’d broken with their disgusting actions. Blood sprayed the air, coating his skin and clothes like paint.

Darien didn’t feel it. He never felt anything when he collected. It was easy to lose himself as he struck, forgetting about his problems. There was nothing in these walls but violence, nothing but cold and uncaring men who hunted demons because they couldn’t get rid of their own.

The world would be a better place, if only slightly, once these three were gone. It was what he told himself—how he justified his actions, every life he'd ever taken.

The nights of Angelthene were dark and full of monsters, but nothing was darker than his past. And he would work at drowning it for the rest of his existence, pushing it below water by whatever means necessary, until the day it stopped coming up for air.

---

Loren awoke from a dead sleep shortly past Witching Hour. She wasn't sure what had roused her; the house was dark and silent, so she figured it was the absence of the Darkslayer in the bed beside her that had kept her from dreaming peacefully.

Another night, and he wasn't here, which meant the tonic had done nothing to help him. She wasn't sure how long this would go on for, but as she stared at the candles flickering on the nightstand, she started to feel sick to her stomach, and she wasn't exactly sure why.

Grabbing her phone off the nightstand, she checked for any messages or phone calls, but there was nothing. He must've gone to the Pit. But he rarely stayed out past two o'clock, so another couple hours at the most, and he should be back in bed beside her.

She laid back down and tried to fall asleep again, pulling the quilt and sheets over her face. Her stomach twisted with hunger, a growl carrying through the room like the whine of an animal. After what happened at the Chalk Door, she'd lost her appetite, so she'd skipped dinner and opted for a hot shower to loosen her muscles and erase the stench of the Pale Man's habitat. The tattoo on her forearm was shifting from a pale blue to a dull red that lit up the quilt; she needed to eat something.

Loren got out of bed and padded to the dresser. She felt around inside the third drawer until she found her favorite pale blue hoodie and pulled it on. The house was cold tonight. Slipping her phone into the pocket of her hoodie, and her feet into her fuzzy slippers, she made her way out of the suite, walking quietly in case the others were sleeping.

When she made it downstairs, she was about to enter the kitchen when something made her pause. She kept her feet light as she walked over to the front door, unlocked it, and poked her head out.

Darien's car was here, and so was Max's SUV. There were more vehicles in the garage, she knew, which was where Darien usually kept his truck, but she didn't bother checking to see if that one was missing. He rarely ever drove it, unless it was to leave the city.

As she was shutting the door on a cool breath of wind, a sound

floated up from the basement. Voices, but she couldn't tell whose or what they were saying. She wondered if Darien and a few of the others were doing strike training again.

Still groggy with sleep, and slightly lightheaded from the dip in her blood sugar, Loren walked to the basement door and made her way down the steps, the icy temperature raising a chill on her skin. The sound she'd heard was gone, but all the lights were on down here. She was sure she hadn't imagined it.

She knew better than to go down the corridor up ahead, where they usually took any victims that required a more thorough killing, so she turned left instead, walking past the gym. There was a door open just ahead, and that was where she stopped, her feet stumbling to a halt.

The spacious room wheeled as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Soon her stomach was wheeling too.

There was blood all over the floor. So much blood, the cement was black with it. Darien was standing over three battered bodies, no shirt on, his skin covered in blood that wasn't his own, a crowbar in hand—it, too, was covered in so much blood, it was dripping with it. The look on his face was wild, his eyes blacker than she'd ever seen them as he spoke quietly to the dying man at his feet—the only one still alive—who begged for his life to be spared. Three other Devils were with him—Jack, Travis, and Maximus. All of them were covered in blood too, their clothes and faces soaked with it, their own weapons dripping, puddles of red everywhere. Literally *everywhere*.

Shit. She'd made a mistake. She wasn't supposed to be here.

As she stumbled away from the door, her slippers scuffed on cement.

Darien was gripping the crowbar, preparing to strike one of the men with a killing blow, when his eyes snapped to her face. That look was still there—a strange mixture of being both dead and alive at the same time.

Loren pressed her hand over her mouth.

And then Darien was shouting. *"I told you to shut the fucking door!"*

Travis's magic lashed out with a blinding sweep of his arm, and the door slammed in her face.

**BANG!** Smoke that smelled like blown-out birthday candles dipped in icing coated the hallway, her hair billowing over her shoulders from the force of the door shutting. There was a hint of smoke in the air that she tried to blink away, but couldn't.

Suddenly dizzy, Loren staggered into the wall, steadying herself against it with a shaking hand.

Her fault—that was her fault. She knew better than to come down here, especially this late at night, but she hadn't been thinking

straight, hadn't been thinking at all, had only wanted to see Darien and bring him back to bed with her. Darien, who—

She refused to finish the thought. Loren closed her eyes to stop her surroundings from gyrating, but it only made her feel worse. Her stomach had turned into a cyclone, and her head spun just as quickly.

It reeked of blood down here. Blood and piss, as if their targets were so frightened, their bladders had loosened.

She didn't know how she did it, but she made it back to the staircase, the floor dipping and rising with every step. Lowering herself to the stairs, she half-crawled up to the main floor, repeatedly swallowing back the need to vomit, bile coating her tongue. The sweat prickling across her skin told her she had only minutes to make it to the bathroom.

When she reached the top, she pulled herself to her feet and hurtled down the hallway. Vomit had crawled up her throat by the time she skidded to a stop in the bathroom and fell to her knees before the toilet, coughing up bile and what little else was in her stomach. There wasn't much in there, so thankfully it didn't take long for her to stop heaving.

The rational part of her mind asked her why she was reacting this way. She had always known what Darien did for work, had always accepted it, right from the moment they'd met. But she had never truly *thought* about it. And even though she knew that the men Darien had been standing above in the basement just now were criminals, it didn't erase the fact that she'd walked in on something she would rather not have seen at all. He was always so careful to keep this part of his life invisible to her, and she had just wrecked it—walking right into the middle of a collection, and witnessing a part of him she knew he didn't want her to see.

Her fault. *Hers*, not his. She had to work through this on her own; she wouldn't let her error affect him, not if she could help it. There was nothing in the world she couldn't get through, as long as she had him.

Gripping the sides of the toilet, she pushed herself to her feet, lowered the lid, and flushed it. She walked to the sink and scrubbed her hands with the hottest water she could get, and when she was done, she cranked the tap to cold and splashed her face. By the time she was drying her hands, she was still shaking from head to toe, the icy temperature of the water playing no role in that.

That was when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Leaning an elbow on the counter, she took it out, unlocked it, and checked the message. For some reason, she'd thought it would be Darien checking in on her, maybe apprehensive about coming to see her in person after...*that*. Instead, she was faced with an unknown

number.

*Be at the gates of AA at quarter after one*, the message read.

“Shit.” Another bout of nausea washed through her as she realized who was watching from the other end of this conversation.

She stared at the screen, debating what to do, trying to think of a plan—a way to tell Darien or one of the others what was going on.

As soon as she took a step toward the bathroom door, preparing to show this message to Darien, and not caring if she had to interrupt his collection, her phone buzzed again.

*Take one more step and see what happens.*

“Go to hell,” she muttered. She stomped to the bathroom door, the light of the stars and the moon filtering through the frosted window. But when she looked down at her phone again, she saw that all the messages were gone. “What...?”

Her phone buzzed again, and five photos came through. She clicked each one, the blood draining from her face.

They were all of Hell’s Gate. Photos of the house from different angles—photos marked with the current date and time.

The house was being watched. The imperator not only knew where they lived, but his people were currently stationed somewhere outside, taking pictures of their *home*—

This time, when her stomach heaved, it had nothing to do with what she’d seen in the basement.

The photos vanished right before her eyes, leaving the screen blank, as if no messages had been sent at all.

But then a new message came through. *Tell your gutter lord one thing, and that house is being blasted sky-high.*

Loren’s fingers shook as she typed up a reply. *Quarter after one tomorrow?*

There was a short moment of silence. Her heart slammed in her chest, and then a new message came through. *One hour from now.*

Loren ran her fingers through her hair. How could this night get any worse than it already was?

She was making her way to the staircase when the front door swung open, nearly giving her a heart attack. And when Ivyana walked inside, beige trench coat swishing around her hips, the feeling was barely eased.

Because Ivyana had just been outside. The house was being watched, and she’d driven right through the gates, completely unaware that her life and her home were currently in danger. Ivy, who was already upset about what was happening with Gaven, and now...

As soon as Ivy caught sight of her, she stopped, the door still open to the night—and whoever was watching. The look on her face made

Loren wonder what her own looked like. "Everything okay?" Ivy asked.

Loren couldn't find words, and the only ones she could think of were lodged in her throat—caught in the sticky web of the enchantment.

Ivy stepped into the house. "Loren? Are you sick? What's wrong?"

Loren's stomach roiled again, her eyes flicking to the dark yard and the road beyond. "I need to go to my school."

She shut the door. "At Witching Hour?"

Her pocket hummed again. If she didn't do as the imperator asked, these people...Darien, Ivyana, the others...they would all be in danger. It was better that she go, instead of standing by and waiting to see what the imperator would do if she never left this house.

"I walked in on something," Loren said, gesturing to the basement door that she'd left ajar. "I knew better than to go down there, and I..."

Ivy's face smoothed with understanding. "You saw." With a soft sigh, Ivy got her keys out of her pocket. "Maybe it's best if you spend the rest of the night in your dorm." She gestured to the staircase. "Get your things. I'll drive you."

Loren didn't allow herself to think about how Darien would react when he came upstairs to discover that she was gone. She knew he would jump to the worst conclusion, and would likely be calling her in no time.

She packed quickly, throwing her books, clothes, and toiletries into her small suitcase, along with the press-on tattoos Kyle had made. They were in the top drawer of the nightstand, just as she'd suspected.

As she got in Ivy's gray jeep, and they drove through the wrought-iron gates, she put her phone on silent, hating herself for letting it get to this point. Everything was spiralling out of control—she could feel it—and she had no idea how to stop it.

But this house and the people who lived there...she needed to protect them, and she wouldn't make any selfish decisions that could put them in danger. They had sacrificed so much for her, and now it was her turn to sacrifice for them.

It took every bit of strength she had not to break down to Ivy as she drove her to Angelthene Academy.

Ivy respected her silence and her need to stare out her window as the dark city sped by, and the distance between them and Hell's Gate—the house that was the truest home Loren had ever had—grew.

Loren glanced at Ivy, whose beautiful features were alit with the red lights glowing off the dashboard. One of her hands was resting on the wheel, steering whenever necessary, while the other tapped out a song on her thigh, manicured nails clicking faintly in the quiet of the



vehicle.

Loren cleared her throat. "What are you playing?"

Ivy smiled at her; she had two dimples, one in each cheek. "It's called Lucky Star. My mother wrote it."

"Can you teach it to me sometime?"

"You're interested in learning piano?"

Loren shrugged. "I wasn't, until I heard you playing." Ivy played beautifully. She played every morning before she went for a jog, the soft music filling all of Hell's Gate. When it woke her up, it was the best kind of alarm clock. Sometimes it had the opposite effect, and it helped her sleep in longer.

Ivy merged onto the freeway that would take them out of the Victoria Amazonica District. Billboards and streetlights lit up the inside of the jeep. "I was worried I might be waking you up," she said. "The others love it and are used to it now. It helps calm us all down."

"It has the same effect on me," Loren said. "Don't ever stop."

Ivy beamed at her. "I would love to teach you. We can play together and wake everyone up." That smile that was so similar to Darien's slowly faded. "Don't worry about tonight. He will be fine and you will be fine."

Loren's throat thickened with emotion. "How do you know? I just left. I left, and I didn't even get to talk to him."

"I will talk to him." Ivy reached across the vehicle to give Loren's wrist a comforting squeeze. "He will understand why you left, and as soon as you are ready to come back, our door will be open to you."

Several minutes later, the jeep slowed to a stop in front of the gates to the school. Too soon—this was all happening too soon, and she had no idea what she would be faced with now.

"Get some rest," Ivy said. "You look very tired. A night away from my brother's horrible sleep schedule will probably do you some good."

But she didn't want that. If it were up to her, she would let him wake her up every night for the rest of her life and be glad about it.

Loren grabbed her things and opened the door.

"We love you, Loren," Ivy called. "I'll see you soon."

Loren hoped that was true.

—

Darien made a point to shower in the basement. He wouldn't chance Loren seeing him again, not with this much blood on him. The others did so as well by his request. He had never been so grateful in all his life for renovating the basement to include more bathrooms.

When he was done, not a trace of gore left on his body, he dressed in a black muscle shirt and faded blue jeans—selected from the

assortment of clothes he kept down here—and went upstairs to his suite. He walked lightly, in case Loren had managed to fall back asleep.

But when he got to the suite, he froze in the doorway.

The bed was empty. There was no light on in the bathroom, no light on outside on the balcony.

He walked into the room, head spinning. The tangle of sheets were cold, and Loren's soft scent had already faded.

He stomped over to the dresser. He pulled open the drawers where she kept her things and sifted through them, only to find that most of her essentials were missing, along with the small bag she always used to transport her stuff to and from Hell's Gate. Her books—grimoires, notebooks, even those tacky romance novels—were gone, too. Almost everything was gone, even her day planner.

"What the fuck," Darien panted, his lungs suddenly tight.

He hurried downstairs, his footfall so heavy that the pictures on the walls shook. Just as he reached the entrance hall, the front door swung open, and Ivy stepped in.

Darien froze.

Ivy paused too. The look on her face told him everything he needed to know, and he felt something in his chest split in half. "Darien—"

"You took her away, didn't you?" It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach, his words coming out as winded as he felt.

Ivy shut the door. Leaned back against it. Crossed her arms. "She just needs time."

"Is that what she told you? Where did you take her?" That voice... he barely recognized it. It was as helpless and defeated as he felt.

"Back to the academy."

He started pacing, running his hands through his damp hair repeatedly. "Did she say anything else? What did she tell you? She was scared, wasn't she? I scared her—"

"Darien, please," Ivy tried. "You're looking into it too much."

"Does this have anything to do with Valary? Is Loren scared of her? Is it because she saw me fucking another woman? Is that it?"

"Darien, she didn't say anything about Valary, okay?"

Then it was the killing, the blood all over the floor, the fucking dead look in his eyes. Or maybe it was a combination of things. Maybe Valary's memories did have something to do with it, and Loren wasn't admitting it. Maybe he'd screwed up in more ways than he'd realized

---

"Just give her a few days," Ivy pleaded gently. "She'll figure it out."

"Figure out what?" he said, the question desperate as he threw his

hands out at his sides. The hands that snapped necks and drove knives into bodies. “That the man she agreed to date is a monster who kills people while she’s sleeping?” This was bound to happen, wasn’t it? It was only a matter of time before reality set in, and the fairy-tale she’d dreamt up about him became clouded over with the dark truth.

“Darien,” Ivy tried again. “I promise everything will be okay. A few days—heck, even a week, a *school* week for crying out loud—and she’ll be right back here again, I know it. Time heals everything.”

No, it didn’t. It hadn’t healed him of his mother’s death, hadn’t healed him of his own sick addictions.

The body was remarkable at healing, but there were some scars that stayed longer than others, and some that never really healed at all.

He stalked to the closet and opened the door, shoving his feet into his boots without bothering to take them out of the cramped space first.

“What are you doing?” Ivy asked.

He didn’t bother with a jacket. Grabbing his keys out of the wooden bowl on the table, he walked up to the door, but Ivy was still blocking it.

“Darien.” Her voice was soft. Far softer than he deserved. “I’m not moving until you tell me what you think you’re going to accomplish by leaving this house.”

“I’m going for a drive,” he lied.

Ivy didn’t buy it. “If you go to that school—”

“I won’t.” He wasn’t sure if that was a lie or not, but he would figure it out once he got in his car.

A minute passed before Ivy uncrossed her arms and stepped out of the way. “Be careful—whatever you’re doing.”

He merely walked by her, not able to get out of this place fast enough, not wanting to say anything he might regret. He didn’t trust himself right now. If he wasn’t careful, he might destroy everything around him, including every relationship he’d ever built.

What was he becoming?

As soon as he was in his car, he took out his phone. Despite what his sister had advised him to do, he still found himself dialling Loren’s number. When it went straight to voicemail, her sweet voice drifting through the speaker, he hung up and called Dallas instead.

The phone rang four times before she picked up. “Hey.” Not only did Dallas sound like she was already awake, but she sounded like she’d expected him to call, which didn’t surprise him. Loren had probably told her everything as soon as she’d entered the dorm room.

“Dallas,” he said, nearly choking on her name. It felt like he was having a heart attack. “It’s Darien.”

"I know, numb nuts. I have caller I.D."

"Is Loren with you? I tried calling her, but it went to voicemail."

"She went to the library to study. Probably shut her phone off or something." Studying at one in the morning? Right. He wondered if she was right there with Dallas, listening in on their conversation and refusing to talk to him.

"Okay." He blinked heavily, knowing full well that he deserved it, if that was what she was doing. "Did she say anything when she got there?"

"Yeah, she...she said she saw something she didn't mean to see."

The pounding of his heart became so frantic that it literally hurt, each thump like a fist cracking his bones. "I didn't mean for her to see it either." He wished Tempus could turn back time again, so he could fix this ugly mistake.

"It was an accident, Darien. I mean, she knows what you do for work, it's not like you've ever hidden it from her."

"But she didn't need to see." With a sigh, he scrubbed a hand over his face. "She shouldn't ever have to see."

"You're reading into it too much. Just give her some space, maybe a day or two, and I guarantee she'll forget about it."

It was a fair suggestion, but Darien couldn't find his voice. And even though a day or two really wasn't a long time, it sure as shit felt like it.

That was two women in the past ten minutes who'd recommended giving Loren time, and he knew he should listen.

"Is that what she told you?" Darien said. "That she wants space?"

There was a pause. "Yes." Dallas's answer was enough to break him.

With a deep inhalation that trembled as much as his hands, he breathed, "Can you just tell her that I love her? Can you do that for me?"

Dallas's tone softened. "I'll tell her."

"Thanks." He hung up before Dallas could say anything else.

For several minutes, he sat there in the car, debating what to do. His selfish heart wanted him to go to Loren and beg her to forgive him, but he knew he should give her space. The gods knew she needed it. He couldn't imagine what it had been like for her, seeing him standing there in that room, covered in blood, looking like a goddamn psychopath... That would've fucked anyone up.

He threw his phone onto the console. "Fuck!" he barked. He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and twisted, veins showing through his skin as he nearly broke the thing clean in half. His heart was racing in his chest, and he could hear his blood coursing through his body, already a simmer that would soon be a

boil.

Another Surge was coming. That would be two in twenty-four hours, but who was fucking counting?

Keys jingled as he started the car, every move mechanical. The engine growled awake, and the emergency brake whined as he lowered it, shoved the gearshift into drive, and slammed his boot down on the accelerator.

Gravel flew under the tires as he turned the car around, headlights bouncing through the yard, and sped down the driveway.

The gates barely opened for him on time. Tires screeched as he turned onto the road, burning up a gray cloud, the stench of hot rubber floating through the vents. He took off down the street, pushing the vehicle as fast as it could go. The needle on the speedometer flew all the way to the right, and it fluttered there as he soared through the dark, streetlights pulsing through the sunroof.

It took him a million years to get to the Pit. By the time he pulled to a stop out front and got out, his breathing was a labored pant, as if he had run a marathon. The solid black of his eyes turned the world into neon paint on a dark canvas. Prostitutes and Blood Potion addicts watched as he crossed the street and entered the building.

The audience surrounding the Pit stayed out of his way as he stalked through. People backed up, stepping on each other's feet, as he walked up to the edge of the deep pit.

He leapt inside, landing on his feet in the bloody sand, not bothering with his usual routine, not bothering to stop at the change room, not giving a shit about anything except unleashing this new wave of anger festering beneath his skin. He sensed Perez observing from his usual seat, but Darien didn't spare him a glance. Maybe when he was done with the demons he would take the worthless money the asshole paid him and shove it down his throat.

There was another hellseher in the pit, waiting for the demon that was gouging the wall with its claws on the other side of the latticed grille.

Darien barked, "Get the hell out of here, or you're dying too."

The man was gone before he had finished speaking.

The bouncers lifted the grille, and the demon burst through, barrelling toward him on all fours, horns glinting in the yellowy light. It leapt for his throat with a guttural snarl, feet tearing up the sand.

Darien grabbed onto the demon's horns, the force of the creature's attack sending them both sliding back several metres, boots and claws digging trenches in the blood-soaked sand. Darien held firm and twisted hard, snapping its neck with one sharp movement.

The rage and hunger in its eyes dulled with death, the misshapen jaw falling slack. It crumpled to the ground, sand spraying the air.

Hair hanging in his face, eyes black as night, Darien looked up at the bouncers, who shrank away from his stare like cowards. "Another."

The night continued like that, heavy and lonely. Filled with the things that were supposed to bring joy and release to his twisted mind, tonight they only made him feel like a monster.

But he *was* a monster, wasn't he? It was all he'd ever been, since the moment his mother had given birth to her black-eyed son.

A monster who'd spent over twenty-four years looking for the light, only to realize it wasn't where he belonged.

Loren's skin crawled as the imperator held her left hand in his, grasping the white band he'd slid onto her finger.

With a counter-clockwise turn, the armor was activated, spreading over her body from her neck to her toes. That same invisible shield of magic acted like a full face helmet, and she resisted the urge to scratch at her skin as it snapped into place with a warm buzzing sensation that rippled across her head, carrying her hair back on a phantom wind.

When Quinton let go of her, she rested her hands against her thighs, fighting the urge to rub off his touch—icky and warm—that lingered under the smooth gloves now covering her hands.

She glanced around at the group of people he'd assembled for entry into Spirit Terra. Among them were Calanthe and Johnathon Kyle.

Johnathon Kyle was CEO of Lucent Enterprises, and every bit as evil as Quinton Lucent. He, too, was a hellseher. Judging from the watery cast to his sharp green eyes, he was dying of the Tricking. Another person motivated to find the Arcanum Well for their own selfish gain.

Endless magic. Endless power. Endless life.

"Why am I the only one wearing white?" Loren asked. Everyone wore the same bodysuits—the kind that had saved her from the Well's explosion, created by the masterminds at Lucent Enterprises. But while hers was white, theirs were black.

Nobody said anything. They kept readying their weapons and speaking quietly through headsets. Not a single one of these people succeeded at making her feel safe, no matter how big and showy their weapons, no matter how capable or resilient they looked.

Klay was here too. Watching her with an expression she couldn't gauge. Even *he* was in black. How nice it would be for him to hide easier if they wound up being hunted in that place—

"Oh, I get it," Loren said coldly. "You want to be able to keep tabs on me easier. Be able to find me if I try to run away and hide."

Quinton stepped up to the shimmering wall and gestured with a gloved hand. "If you're finished grumbling, Miss Calla."

The Divide rippling in the cement wall looked different today. Two pillars now stood on either side of it, as if holding up the shimmering entrance into Spirit like a sheet of fabric on a clothesline. The pillars were black like volcanic glass. It undulated with magic, as if the stone

wasn't stone at all, but liquid. Ancient symbols dotted its surface, all different colors that ran up to where the pillars ended in sharp peaks.

"You're missing a couple pieces," Loren said cheekily, gesturing to the small moon-shaped impressions marking each pillar, one moon each, both of them at her eye-level.

Quinton merely waited, that cold face betraying no hint of what he was thinking. But then one of his men stepped up to his side, speaking quietly in his ear. Loren watched as Quinton's face was transformed by whatever he was hearing, and she swore she picked up on a name she never wanted to hear from any of these filthy mouths.

Those cruel eyes of Quinton's roved her face. "You're lucky your Devil decided to head to the Pit. If we'd seen him coming this way, you would both be dead right now."

"How dare you watch him," she said coldly. "Leave him out of this, or our deal is off. Do you understand me?"

Calanthe stepped up to the emperor's side. "Watch your tone, Miss Calla. You do realize who you are speaking to, don't you?"

"I don't give a shit who any of you are. Least of all *you*." She bared her teeth at Quinton, fingers curling into fists. "And I am not taking one more step unless you promise me that you will leave Darien, the other Devils, and my friends alone."

Quinton's scarred mouth held a quirk of amusement. "We will continue to watch," he began, "but rest assured we will not touch any of them, as long as you comply."

Choking back her rage and the nausea in her gut, she bit out, "Good. Then I am yours to use." Despite what she'd just said, she had to force her feet to move; they felt weighed down, heavy as her heart. Even down here, surrounded by these people, her feet inching toward a realm of death, her mind drifted back to Darien. She wondered how many phone calls she'd missed, or if he'd resorted to calling Dallas before going to the Pit. The anger she felt for the emperor for tearing her away from Darien at the worst possible time ran deep, and she felt her cheeks heat up with anger, her hands curling into fists. As soon as she figured out how to break these people, that was exactly what she was going to do.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Quinton give a sharp nod.

Two of his men came up on either side of her. One grabbed her by the head, holding it still, while the other pushed her hair off her neck.

"What—" Something sharp came at her in a blind spot. There was a piercing feeling in her jugular, a sharp pain that made her eyes instantly water as the contents of a syringe were emptied into her bloodstream.

When they let go of her, she pushed away from them, looking to the emperor for an explanation, breath coming through her teeth.



He tilted his head to the side, just far enough to show her the pale numbers glowing on the skin below his left ear. It was a clock.

"What is that?" she gritted out.

Calanthe said, "We call them Life Clocks."

"This is necessary, Loren," Quinton said. "These clocks are our only means of survival in a place of death. This will keep us alive while we look for the Well."

Her hand went to the numbers on her own neck. The area tingled and pulsed just like a heart, every thump marking the seconds that ticked by. "And what happens when the clocks run out?"

"We die," he said matter-of-factly. A cold smile ghosted across his mouth, and there was a sickening glint in his eyes that told her he was getting more satisfaction out of this than any person should. "No reason to fret. We'll be back through the Veil before that can happen."

There were more syringes in a silver briefcase on the table that was pressed up against the wall, all filled with teal liquid.

"Are you bringing spares?" she asked.

It was Calanthe who answered. "They don't last in Spirit. If we tried to take them with us, they would become useless and drained of their magic the moment they passed through this curtain."

"Great."

Quinton gestured again to the shimmering entrance. Seeing the reluctance on her face, he said, "The faster you find the Well for me, the sooner you can return to your trouble-free life. It's all I ask, Loren."

The faster she found the Well, the sooner she could use it to awaken her own magic to its fullest potential and smash these people into smithereens.

A plan was taking root in her mind. One that involved the extra syringes in the briefcase. She only hoped her plan would work.

With the imperator at her left and Klay at her right, a dozen armed men and women at their backs, she stepped through the scintillating barrier and into Spirit Terra.

—

The world on the other side of the Divide that separated the land of the living from the dead was as fascinating as it was horrific.

The ground was deep violet. It was dry, nearly every inch of it covered in spiny vegetation and old bones. It shifted under Loren's feet with every step, the whisper of strange soil rippling across flat land that stretched on as far as the eye could see. The sky was as purple as the ground, and there was a mass of black clouds in the distance, churning with the threat of an otherworldly storm.

Being inside the realm of the dead made her feel stretched thin and hollow. She imagined this was how spirits felt as they drifted through the afterlife, with no purpose or sense of direction. The air here was searingly dry and frigid. Gusts of it scraped down her throat like tiny knives with every inhalation.

Quinton stepped up to her side. "How do you feel?" There was a subtle metallic echo to his voice.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow. "Out of place," she admitted.

Out of place in more ways than one, if she factored in the people standing around her, all of them watching her with the kind of attention a vulture might have while circling a corpse. Every time she looked at Calanthe, the vampire smiled, elongated canines glinting.

Quinton pressed, "And what of your magic?"

Her hand drifted toward her chest, where it hovered above the solar amulet resting beneath her bodysuit. It hung against her skin like a chunk of ice, emitting no indication as to where she might find the Well.

"I haven't felt anything yet," she said.

He glanced about the group. "We'll start walking. See if she feels anything." Those cold eyes settled on her again. "Treat it like a compass, Miss Calla. See if it speaks to you."

*How about I treat it like a knife and shove it up your ass?*

But she started walking, the emperor's men surrounding her. Peering into the distance told her nothing; the land looked the same everywhere. There were soft hills rolling in the east, and what looked like a crumbling structure to the west. But aside from that, nothing really stood out.

This might be a lot harder than any of them were banking on, including the emperor.

"How far does it go?" she asked.

It was Calanthe who answered. "Spirit Terra is exactly the same size as the Terra we know."

Great. This could literally take years, which was why they were banking on her pointing them in the right direction.

The snap of a bone under her boot caused her to look down.

There were veins of lilac running through the ground, webbing out in all directions. Tiny bubbles that reminded her of soda floated through them, but they looked firm to the touch, and when the sole of her boot settled down on one of the forks of purple, it held firm, briefly flaring a brighter shade until the moment she took her next step.

"What are these?" she asked.

No one answered.

The longer they walked, the more lines appeared. So many of

them, they reminded her of overlapping spiderwebs or tree roots. Klay was close to her side, looking at the lines as well, though he didn't appear to be interested in what he was seeing.

She whispered, "Do you know what these are?"

His answer was low and flat. "Channels." Gray eyes sharpened into focus to assess the veins. "They carry magic from the Eye."

Loren gazed out at the stormy horizon. "The anima mundi?"

"I would assume so."

The anima mundi was the source of all magic that bound the universe together. It powered their cars, lit their homes, generated forcefields over the many cities throughout Terra. It was even responsible for cell reception and the internet. Without it, their world would function very differently. Loren supposed she shouldn't be surprised that the anima mundi would be here as well, but she'd never seen anything like these veins running through their own world.

And the veins in this area, the ones beneath her feet, were various shades of purple. Just purple, not a single other color.

"What is the Eye?"

"It is the centre of the spirit realm. The core of the earth."

"Does anything live in here?"

"Live?" Klay looked ahead, wary gaze scanning the land. "I wouldn't call them living beings, but there are sentient ones."

"Can they hurt us?"

His head turned toward her almost imperceptibly, but his eyes remained straight ahead. "Yes."

"That's why you were nervous when we were first coming here."

His mouth tilted down at one edge. "I wasn't nervous."

"You don't need to be ashamed to admit it," she said. "Any sane person would be afraid of this place."

His eyes found hers. "Think your Darkslayer would be afraid?"

"Not many things scare him." She glanced around. "But I think this place would unsettle just about anyone."

The crunch of dry ground beneath their feet carried through the area, and cool mist wrapped around Loren's limbs, its chill somehow managing to seep through the bodysuit, where it wormed into the marrow of her bones.

"Can these weapons protect us?" She gestured subtly to the men and women surrounding them. Their automatic weapons were made of a glasslike material, ribbons of color pulsing through the cartridges.

Klay chewed on his lip. "Hopefully. We've been lucky enough not to have to test that theory yet."

She hoped they would stay lucky for the whole time she was required to be in here.

"What's that over there?" Loren asked, gesturing to a wall of

shimmering black way off in the distance, nearly identical to the one they'd just walked through to get into Spirit Terra, only this one didn't seem to have a beginning or an end. It stretched on to the left and the right for as far as she could see. If she tipped her head back, it disappeared all the way up into the sky. In front of that wall was a pillar as big as the Control Tower, identical in appearance to the two she'd seen out front of the entrance into Spirit. The pillar looked small from this distance, its size deceiving.

Something about it made Loren not want to get any closer.

"Another Veil," Klay replied. "Spirit Terra is divided into realms that are separated by curtains, or Veils, whatever you prefer to call them. We've found two so far."

"How do we get through?"

Quinton said, "That's what you're for, Loren."

"Again," she said in a hard voice, "I don't even know how I did it the first time. How do you expect me to be able to do it again?"

Quinton didn't say anything. The group kept walking. It was hard to tell how much time was passing in here. The sky was different; it had no stars, but she swore she saw a moon glowing beyond the storm, a sickle of blood-red against a violet backdrop.

"Feel anything yet, Miss Calla?" Calanthe asked.

No, she wasn't. But before she could reply in truth, she decided to test the waters and see what she was working with, how difficult it might be to fool them and turn the tables in her favor.

"Let me try something." She paused, placing a hand over her chest with feigned concentration. "My amulet has always lit up when my magic is active. It has a white light and...and heat."

"And?" Johnathon Kyle prompted, looking her over with an expression that bordered on disgust. "Do you feel anything now?"

"I feel a tug," she whispered.

Calanthe took an eager step forward. "Where, Miss Calla?"

"To the east."

Before she could change directions, the emperor's arm shot out, stopping her in her tracks. He stepped up to her, and she resisted the urge to back away as he snaked his little finger under the chain of her solar amulet, tugging it up from under her bodysuit. He studied the metal—cold and lightless. When his eyes met hers, she found that they were as cold and lightless as her amulet.

He let go of the chain and clamped his hand around her throat. The whites of his eyes were swallowed up by black first, followed by the irises.

"Stop." Her voice was a strangled cry as her hands went to his. She tried to pull his grip off, but he only squeezed tighter, cutting off her supply of oxygen as his magic tunnelled into her mind.

Images flashed through her head. Terrible images of death and blood and hurt, all of them involving her family—

“Please—” she tried. She could feel her face turning as purple as the ground and sky, and her eyes began to water.

The images just kept coming.

Darien and Ivyana, bleeding out on the kitchen floor at Hell’s Gate.

Sabrina and Dallas, impaled on the gates of Angelthene Academy, their broken bodies bowed in death, blank eyes staring skyward on a bright and beautiful spring day, the contrast making their deaths all the more horrible.

The last image was the worst. She nearly fell to her knees as it ripped through her mind, a cry climbing up her throat.

Darien, nailed to the wall beside the entrance to Spirit Terra, head bowed in death, arms spread out at his sides like wings. Blood dripped to the floor, forming a lake of red—

A flare of warmth spread through her chest. It spread and spread, liquid heat pooling around her heart. The magic coursed through every limb. It made her whole body tingle, and she held onto it like it was an anchor, willing it to get her out of here—

She ripped free of the emperor’s hold, stumbling back, ground crunching under her frantic footsteps.

Klay hurried behind her and caught her just before she could fall.

“Fuck,” she panted at Quinton, swallowing the ache in her throat as she regained her balance, “you.”

That scarred mouth formed a cruel smile. “I knew you had it in you.”

He closed the distance between them with three casual strides. She tried to back away, but Klay held firmly to her upper arms, the traitor.

Quinton leaned in close to her ear, breath tickling her neck as he whispered, “Do not lie again. Or those images I just showed you will no longer be of my mind’s own making.”

Loren swallowed. “I can’t find the Well if my amulet does not respond.”

“Then make it respond, Miss Calla,” he hissed, stepping in close, their noses nearly touching. His breath wafted across her face. She turned her head, every inch of her aching to get away from him. “Make it respond. It spoke to you just now, answering your plea to break away. Make it answer your desire to find the Arcanum Well, or what you just saw will become your reality. Do we have an understanding?”

She stared up at him, hatred shooting from her eyes.

He repeated, eyes still a horrid, shining black, “Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” His attention went to his men. “Take her back. We are done for the day.”

As the group prepared to head back, Klay finally let go of her, the sudden absence of not having anything to lean on, combined with the lingering images the imperator had forced into her mind, made her sway in place, chest swelling with anger.

The imperator was still watching her, and so was Johnathon. It was the former who said, “I’m giving you ten days, Miss Calla. Ten days to fully awaken your magic. The next time I summon you back here, you’d better have something worth showing me.”

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As soon as Loren was back through the Veil, the noise of the waterfalls filling the tunnels, she took off the ring, the armor and magic instantly vanishing, and shoved it into the pocket of her jeans.

She stepped up to the table where she’d left her bag, and as she slung the strap over her shoulder, she swung it harder than she needed to, knocking the open briefcase of syringes onto the floor.

“Stupid cunt!” barked one of the guards, his gravelly voice volleying against the walls.

Syringes rolled, a few of them clinking against her sneakers.

“I’m sorry,” she blubbered, bending to pick them up. As she fumbled to grab some and dump them back into the briefcase, she kept two in her palm, slipping them up under the sleeve of her jacket

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Right in the nick of time too, because the imperator was there, pulling her to her feet with fingers that bruised her arm.

“Get her out of here!” He shoved her at Klay, and she stopped herself before she could crash into him.

“I’m s-sorry,” she said again, managing to stutter convincingly. She was careful to keep both hands gripping her sleeves tightly, her head down in feigned embarrassment, trying her damn best not to draw attention to the syringes that were pressed up against her wrist.

Klay grabbed her by the upper arm and led her out of the tunnels, pulling her along beside him so quickly that she could barely keep up.

When it came to Spirit Terra, there wasn’t a lot Loren was certain of, but she did know this: it was her magic, combined with the blast of the Arcanum Well, that had cut through the Veil. The Well was the reason there was an entrance into the realm of the dead at all, and it was the Well that had birthed her.

If she could figure out how to get into Spirit Terra, how to open another door somewhere else—somewhere that wasn’t so heavily guarded by the imperator’s men—then maybe she could go into the

realm on her own and find the Arcanum Well before they could get to it.

And, more importantly, once she knew how to enter the realm on her own, she could show Darien.

She might not be able to *tell* him what was going on with her, but she might be able to *show* him. She would never lead him down here—down to a place so heavily guarded by the imperator's men, a move that would surely spell death for him and anyone he brought with—so this was her only chance.

She would just have to figure out how to do it.

At school the following day, Loren detected a change. There were new faces here, new people walking the hallways—new professors, all of them dressed in academy robes.

She knew better than to fall for that trick. These people were here for *her*. She could see it in the way they watched her, tailing her down every corridor and into every classroom. Of course the imperator would be able to get away with such intrusive behaviour. She wondered which lies the new headmaster had been forced to believe. Perhaps these people had told the headmaster—Miles Osborn was his name—that they were here for research. Whatever they'd told him, he'd clearly believed it.

Loren's first class of the day was incantations. The course was a requirement for entry level jobs in herbal magic, so even humans like her, who could perform no spells, were required to not only take the course but to pass in flying colors.

Lucky for her, she had the best partner in the class, and that was Sabrina Van Arsdell.

Sabrina was exactly the person Loren needed to see. As soon as the professor ended her lecture, and told them to practice what they'd learned today for the next ten to fifteen minutes, Loren jumped at the chance to talk to Sabrina.

Where she sat at a desk next to Sabrina, she turned in her seat, the legs of her chair grinding across the stone floor. "Remember that day in history class when Griffith got mad at me for texting?"

Sabrina snickered, her fiery eyes rolling. "Professor Griffith *always* gets mad at you for texting," she teased. "You're going to have to be more specific than that, girl."

"She was talking about the old legends involving the Crossroads."

"Oh, *that* day," Sabrina said with a grin. "What about it?"

"I was wondering if I could photocopy your notes."

Sabrina grabbed her book bag and dug around in it. "Afraid you're going to fail the big exam?" She found one of many notebooks and threw it open on the desk.

"Very." It wasn't exactly a lie.

Sabrina leafed through the pages until she found her notes from



that day. "Here." She reached across the space between their desks and thumped the notebook down. "Give this back by tomorrow, please."

"No problem." But as she scanned the pages—there were nearly ten of them—she realized Sabrina had gone so in depth with her note-taking that Loren couldn't wrap her mind around half the things she'd written down. There was far too much detail. What she needed was a quick summary—any information that might make her better understand the Veil and how it worked, how it kept their world separated from Spirit.

Sabrina had her stave out as she prepared to practice incantations, magic sparking as she waved it through the air. The other students were doing the same, the smell of candle smoke choking the classroom.

"Can you dumb it down for me?" Loren asked.

Sabrina's stave stilled in the air. "Do I need to do it now? We're supposed to be practicing."

"If you could just give me the gist. Please, Sab. You know I'm not the best at this."

She set aside her stave and turned to face her. "There are three realms that all overlap but are essentially a part of the same world. Griffith explained it best as a coin with two sides and a middle, the middle representing Terra, aka our world. On one flip side of the coin is Spirit Terra; on the other is the Fifth Dimension. And cutting across the coin, kind of like puncture holes that go through all three realms, are the Crossroads, places of liminality that are stuck between worlds, kind of like floating through space."

"What is the Fifth Dimension?" Loren asked. And, more importantly, what were the other four? She'd heard theories about them, theories about what the Fifth Dimension looked like, but that was all they were: theories.

Sabrina shrugged.

"Is all this true?"

She shrugged again. "If she's teaching it in history class, then she must believe it, even if it isn't true."

"What do you believe?"

Sabrina folded her arms on the desk. "The legends say that our world used to be one with Spirit Terra; they weren't separate. The living coexisted with the dead in a delicate balance of things, until one day a great war ensued. Power-hungry gods and goddesses began a slaughter that would have resulted in the deaths of all beings they considered lower than them." Her mouth twisted into a grimace as she added, "Mainly humans."

Loren shuddered.

“But there was one goddess who had a soft heart for mortal kind. To protect them, she split the worlds in two by creating a duplicate of Terra, and she separated them with a curtain that would never come down.”

The Veil.

Sabrina continued, “One god in particular was angry at the goddess for interfering with his plans. As the Veil was being cast, and he was doomed to dwell forever on the other side of it, kept away from mortals and other lesser beings, he attacked her. But it was already too late, the Veil pulling him away. He managed to nick her with a blade of legendary black adamant, cutting her right below the jaw. But that was the most he could do before he was trapped forever in the spirit realm.”

“What happened to her?”

“Legend says she chose to live here in our world, walking among mortals. That’s where they say we all originated—werewolves, witches, vampires. From the gods and goddesses who were locked in Spirit Terra.”

“Miss Van Arsdell,” drawled the professor. She was standing right behind them.

Sabrina promptly turned to face her. “Yes, Miss Ashby?”

“Let’s see your disarming spell.”

Thoughts swarmed Loren’s head. She closed the notebook Sabrina had given her and stuffed it in her bag.

With the help of the Arcanum Well and its replica, her magic had torn open the Veil this nameless goddess had cast thousands of years ago.

Loren didn’t want to find out what would happen if these gods from legend discovered the way back into their world had been reopened.

"Sometimes you freak me out," Kyle said as he shaded in one of the calla lilies on Darien's chest.

Where he was lying on his back on a black table in the main room of Diablo Tattoo, an arm slung over his eyes, Darien grunted.

"Oh, you're not talking today, okay," Kyle said, wiping excess ink away with a disposable towel. "I get it. You going to tell me what happened? Tattoo artists double as therapists, you know. It's a hell of a lot cheaper than paying for both."

"Why?" Darien mumbled, the word nearly a grunt too.

Kyle paused, the tip of the tattoo gun hovering just above the new ink. The heel of his gloved hand was resting on Darien's chest, the vibrations from the tattoo machine shaking through him. "Why what? Why am I a therapist?" He returned to his shading, the feeling of many tiny bee stings lulling Darien closer to rest.

"No." He dug his knuckles into his eyes, rubbing the sleep out of them. "I meant why do I freak you out?"

"Because when you come here for new ink, you act like it's a spa appointment or something. You never even flinch. You might as well have cucumbers on your eyes for good measure."

"It feels good," he slurred, focusing on the stinging pain rippling through him. "You know I like pain."

"Yeah, that's why you freak me out."

Silence fell between them, sliced up by the buzzing of tattoo guns and the drone of idle conversation from the other clients and artists.

Darien said, "Do you think I'm fucked up?"

The smile that spread across Kyle's face could practically be felt, Darien didn't even have to look. "Sure I do. Is that even a question?"

Darien lifted his arm up far enough to glare at Kyle, who was grinning down at his artwork, just as he'd suspected. "Screw you. I was being serious."

"So was I." Kyle paused. Darien lowered his arm back down, the dim lighting in this place bright as the sun today. "Hold on, I think I'm getting a read on you. You're asking if I think you're fucked up because you're worried that you *are* fucked up. Am I hot or cold?"

"Hot."

"Does this have anything to do with your girl?"

Another grunt climbed up his throat; it was the most he could manage. Talk of his girl made his heart splinter in his chest.

Monday had arrived. Half his weekend had been spent without her for the first time in...shit, *months*. He sometimes managed to steal the odd weekday with her as well, but weekends...his weekends belonged to Loren, and hers to him. He hadn't realized how firmly he'd attached himself to the routine they had built together, and now that it had been ripped out of his grasp, he felt lost. Stuck in a dark place with no compass or light to point him home.

"I'll take that as a yes," Kyle said, his words slicing into Darien's brooding. "Why don't you let me guess? I'm good at guessing."

Another wave of silence fell, the murmuring of other conversations picking at Darien's brain. Sometimes he hated having such sharp hearing; it felt invasive and too loud, and made days like today—when he was fighting a skull-splitting headache—harder to bear.

When the silence stretched on, Darien said, "Are you going to be guessing today or tomorrow?"

"I'm thinking," Kyle murmured. "Your girl knew you were a Darkslayer before she started dating you, right?"

Knuckles dug into his forehead as Darien formed a fist against it, pushing hard at the ache between his brows. "Everyone everywhere knows I'm a Darkslayer."

"I'm getting hotter, alright." A new smile coated Kyle's words. "She knew you were a Darkslayer, but maybe now the reality of it is finally setting in."

"Hot as Ignis."

"Bull's eye!" Kyle exclaimed with a wheezing laugh.

Darien sighed. "Got any advice?"

"Well." Kyle cleared his throat. "I've had two failed marriages, so I'm not very good at this kind of thing. But since you're asking, I'd say to give her time and space. Let her work it out on her own. I don't know the whole story, since you like to just sit there and grunt today, but maybe she got a little freaked out or something."

"She got a *lot* freaked out." The look on her face when she'd walked in on that mess... He never wanted to see it again.

"My advice remains the same," Kyle said. "Time and space."

"Yeah, two things I feel like I can't do without dying." He lifted his fist off his face and looked at the clock on the wall. "What does that say?"

Kyle peeked over his shoulder at the rose-shaped timepiece. "One o'clock." He tsked, shaking his head. "Lying rat bastard. I just changed the damn batteries." He rolled up the sleeve of his plaid shirt and checked his watch. "It's almost two."

Shit, he was going to be late. "I need to roll."

Kyle powered down the tattoo machine and rolled his stool back, giving Darien space to swing his legs over the side of the table and

stand up. "Try not to wreck my beautiful work this time, will you?"

"I make no promises." Darien reached for the black long-sleeve he'd discarded on a stool.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Kyle snatched a tube of ointment and a roll of waterproof bandages off the rolling tray beside the table.

Standing still as a statue, Darien watched the motionless hands on the clock as Kyle applied a thin layer of the ointment to his tattoo. When he was done, he dressed the area with bandages, the plastic making Darien's skin itch worse than the tattoo.

"One hour," Kyle said. "And then you can take these off."

As soon as Kyle stepped away, Darien put his shirt on and felt around in the pockets of his jeans until he found his car keys.

"Where you off to?" Kyle asked as he moved his tools aside and misted the work table and tray with disinfectant.

"I need to pick up Malakai."

"Friends again?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Well, if I suddenly see your name in the obituary," Kyle said, wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his wrist, "I'll know who did it."

Darien made for the door. "Make sure you avenge me. If it's that asshole who puts me in the ground, I'll haunt you for the rest of your existence if you don't."

"Noted."

"Later," Darien called as he pushed through the door and walked into an overcast afternoon, bells chiming with his departure.

"Later."

—

Darien pulled a gray hoodie over his head and shoved his hands through the sleeves, purposely smacking Malakai, who was in the passenger seat of his car, in the face with an open palm.

A fist thudded against Darien's temple, the attack so hard and swift that his head bumped into his window, the blow barely softened by the cotton covering his face. He finished yanking the collar down so he could see, and he was met with the face of the Reaper, red with anger, as he adjusted his own hoodie.

Darien scowled back. "Can't take a joke, can you?"

They were in an industrial zone in the district of Oldtown, an eyesore of an area consisting of storage facilities, chemical plants, steel mills, wrecking yards, and a handful of empty buildings, all of them rotting with age and neglect. A coat of smog hung over the city, the pollution and the soupy temperature made worse by the

oppressive weather.

“Not when it’s you,” Malakai said with a grinding of his teeth, jaw flexing under his beard. “Besides, I owed you one for scratching my bike.” He opened the compartment in the center console and started digging around like he owned the car.

“What the hell are you doing?” Darien snapped.

The Reaper pulled out a resealable bag of Stygian salts and shook it in his face. “I’m taking some of these.”

Darien ripped it out of his grip, plastic nearly tearing. “These are mine, you don’t get any.” When Malakai lunged for the bag, Darien moved it out of his reach. “Why do you want these?” he demanded, moving it again as Malakai swiped for the bag.

Unable to reach it, he resorted to punching Darien in the shoulder instead. “Why the fuck do you think I want them? In case it’s a goddamn ambush!”

“It’s not an ambush, we can trust this guy.”

“So maybe he wants to help us,” Malakai began dubiously, eyes wide with exaggerated intensity. “So what? I don’t trust his boss.”

“Neither do I, but we won’t need these, you’ll just be wasting them.”

“Fine, you salt hog.” Malakai lifted himself up in his seat to get his hand in the back pocket of his gray jeans. Darien watched as he retrieved a glass bottle of eye drops, thick and black as ink. He tipped his head back and dripped three drops into each eye. By the time he’d twisted the cap back on, his eyes were solid black, and there were dark lines showing through the thin skin around his eyes and on his temples.

“Venom?” Darien scoffed. “Really? You know that shit is highly addictive, right?”

Malakai tucked the bottle back into his pocket. “You won’t share your salt, so this is what I have to do.”

“When did you become paranoid?” Darien asked, throwing the bag of black salt back into the compartment and slamming the lid shut.

“I’m not paranoid, I’m smart. And you’re clearly not smart.” Malakai opened his door and placed a booted foot on the damp pavement. “You coming or what?” He glanced back, hair swaying in the breeze. “What are you staring at, dumbass?”

“You look terrifying.” Darien had only taken Venom once, and that was two years ago. He was rip-roaring drunk at a nightclub and thought it’d be a good idea, and when he’d stumbled into the bathroom, he’d nearly scared the piss out of himself when he saw his reflection. He might’ve even smashed the glass, but he couldn’t really remember.

When Malakai smiled, the combination of sharp silver canines and

black-veined eyes reminded Darien of that monster under the Strangler Fig. “Good,” Malakai said. “That way if they *are* planning an ambush, they’ll think twice before messing with us.”

Yeah, that was probably true. Venom allowed hellsehers to dive deeper into their stores of magic than Stygian salts, but unlike the salts, it came with a hefty price. Not only was it addicting, but because of the heaps of magic a person could access while on Venom, their risk of contracting the Tricking increased almost tenfold.

Malakai could go ahead and mess around with Venom, but Darien would pass. He didn’t come this far in life, ditching the drugs years ago, only to end up right back on them again. He adjusted the gun that was strapped near his hip—concealed by his jeans and hoodie—and got out of the car.

Finn was waiting for them in a gray sedan near the gates to a wrecking yard. Boots splashed in puddles of mud as Darien and Malakai crossed the parking lot, and gulls yacked from their perches on warehouse roofs. They both kept their hoods up, concealing their faces from view, regardless that the area was seemingly deserted. Still, Darien scanned his surroundings with his Sight, looking through the walls of the buildings and the rusted skeletons of old vehicles, the trees and the cement barricades lining the roads up on the hill.

When they were several feet from the vehicle, Finn got out of the driver’s side, leaving the engine running as he shut the door. There were spells on the car, but Darien could see through them just enough to tell there was no one else inside.

Mud squelched as Finn approached at a casual pace, hands in his jacket pockets. “I have to admit this is weird,” Finn said.

“It’s just as weird for us,” Darien replied. He cast a pointed look about the area. “Where’s your backup?”

“Don’t need them. I trust you guys.”

Malakai gave a derisive snort. “That’s pretty ballsy. Isn’t having backup a requirement for hotshot detectives like you?”

“They’re on standby on thirty-fourth.” He jerked his chin at the roads up top. “Go have a look if you don’t believe me.”

Malakai grunted in irritation.

Finn frowned at the dark webbing around Malakai’s eyes. “I’m going to pretend I don’t see you high on Venom right now.”

The Reaper took his right hand out of the pocket of his hoodie and gave Finn the middle finger.

“Alright, enough pissing around,” Darien said, reaching into his back pocket. “I’ve got Gaven’s trust with his newest route and a few names of old clients who buy in bulk.” He pulled out the photocopy of the route Gaven had given him at the Advocate and handed it to Finn.

A storm rumbled in the distance as Finn unfolded the square of

paper and scanned it. Darien could smell the rain coming, an earthy zing made more pungent with the threat of lightning—a sharp odor that reminded him of electrical sparks.

“So, what’s the plan?” Darien prompted. “You wanted dealer intel, I’ve brought you dealer intel. Now tell me how long I need to pretend to tolerate these guys until we can throw them behind bars.”

“This is only one route,” Finn sighed, stroking the dark stubble on his chin. “One route, and it’s probably temporary, considering Gaven is smart enough to not fully trust you yet, and no locations for where they or their buyers keep their supplies.” He slapped the paper with the back of his hand and shook his head.

“How many do you want?” Darien snapped. “The longer I do this, the riskier it’ll get.”

“It’s a start, I’m not complaining,” Finn said quickly. He refolded the paper and tucked it into his jacket. “I want you to watch Gaven for the next little while, see if he frequents this route or if it’s a one-time thing, and see if you can find out where he keeps his supplies. These men he’s selling to...they buy these weapons in the hundreds, if not thousands. They, and Gaven, need to be taken down.”

Gang activity in Angelthene was at an all-time high, just like its drug problem. People were dying every day. Innocents were getting caught in the crossfire, including those few students who’d died only a couple of weeks ago, killed by a Blood Stave attack—a horrible tragedy that never should’ve happened. And it wasn’t just Angelthene; it was the whole state of Witheredge, and Gaven and his men were the suppliers who fuelled these crimes, bringing in magic staves charged with Blood Magic from overseas. At least, that was what the rumors claimed. But Gaven was careful to keep his roots buried deep. Darien would be willing to bet that where he sourced his weapons from was a lot closer than he claimed.

Darien said, “As soon as we find out where they keep their supplies, I want you to arrest Gaven, his men, and his clients. Got it?”

“I’ll run it by Nolan,” Finn replied. “But I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

Darien gave a cold smirk and shared a loaded glance with Malakai.

The Reaper’s eyes shone a sinister black as he drawled, “It won’t be a problem?”

Darien said, “You told me Nolan wants the weapons dealers in Angelthene done away with—wants *Gaven* done away with. I’m not his grunt who will go after every piece of scum he decides he wants to take down.” Even if he wanted to, it would be impossible. While he understood Nolan’s desire to take down the biggest fish involved, the fact remained that crumbling the entire Blood Staves operation would be a fool’s errand. Besides, that was what the MPU—not Darkslayers—



was for, what they were paid to do, and it would be a battle they would likely fight forever. Locking Gaven and his men up would slow it down and give them time to breathe, without a doubt, but in the end it was one big goose chase, ongoing and ultimately futile.

"I know, I know," Finn sighed. "You worry about Gaven, I'll worry about Nolan."

"You'd better."

With a sharp nod that appeared to be the most thanks they would get, Finn headed for his vehicle. "Keep in touch."

Malakai mimicked the detective in a squeaky voice, keeping his volume low enough that Finn couldn't hear, as he and Darien walked back through the muddy lot.

They were almost back at his car when Malakai said, "How about instead we find this Nolan guy and snap his scrawny neck for thinking he can manipulate us like this?"

"I debated that myself, until Gaven got involved."

"We could just kill his ass instead." If only it were that easy.

"He knows where I live."

Malakai stopped walking. "Shit, are you serious?"

"That's why I'm doing this," Darien admitted. He was still trying to figure out how it had happened. No one ever found out the location of Hell's Gate unless Darien or one of the other Devils gave it to them. "And I'm not about to leave my house and run away like a coward. He's going into Blackwater to rot, and I don't care how many lives I have to end to put him there."

They started walking to the car again, and they were about to get in when Malakai glanced over his shoulder to see Finn driving up the road, tires splashing through deep puddles that were practically ponds, the ground in Angelthene too perpetually dry to sop up the water. "You sure you trust him?"

"No. There aren't many people I trust, but while he's using me and my resources, I'm also using his."

Malakai swung open his door. "Anything else you need from me? I've got a collection to make in..." He checked his phone. "One hour."

Darien got in the car. "I need you to meet me at White Garden at four. Think you can manage that?"

"I'm sure I can."

"And have a couple Reapers watch Gaven for me, will you?" He would rather trust the Reapers than ask Channary for assistance, at least not yet. And he wasn't about to drag his Angel friends into this mess either, although Dominic and Conrad had already offered.

Malakai threw himself onto the passenger's seat and shook his hood off. "Brodie and Macen...", he decided under his breath as he pulled up a conversation thread on his phone. "They're good at not

getting caught.” He paused, thumb hovering over the screen. Black eyes snapped to Darien’s face. “Where can they find Gaven? He trackable?”

Darien shook his head as he started the car and drove up the road, mud splashing. “His aura’s always hidden.” Likely by an Avertera talisman, the rare piece of jewelry that was getting harder to find. He would need to buy a new one and give it to Dallas to pass along to Loren the next time the witch stayed the night. He didn’t trust her current one not to run out soon.

“Of course,” Malakai muttered.

“But he frequents the Devil’s Advocate.” Darien shoved his hood back. “Shouldn’t be hard to find.”

“Of course,” Malakai said again, this time with a callous chuckle.

Thoughts spun through Darien’s head as he drove Malakai back to where they’d left his truck. As the car crawled down thirty-fourth, he scanned the road for any indication that Finn’s so-called backup had been in the area, but there were no hints of them left behind, not even tire prints in the mud that ran along the shoulder of the road. Maybe the detective did trust them enough to have come here alone, but Darien couldn’t decide if that made the man brave or just plain fucking stupid.

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As soon as Malakai was out of the car, throwing Darien the middle finger as he jumped up into the driver’s seat of his white truck—parked down the alley between Blood Bath and Queens of the Damned—Darien started thinking. He drove out of Oldtown and merged onto the highway that would take him up to Angelthene Boulevard.

Steering partly with his knee as he wove through six lanes of steady traffic, he reached into the back seat and grabbed his jacket. He threw it onto the passenger’s seat and found his phone in one of the pockets. He found Tanner on speed dial and hit CALL.

The hacker picked up on the third ring. “Sup?” The word was muffled and punctuated with chewing.

“What are you eating this time?”

“Donuts.” Tissue paper crinkled in the background. “Whisking Witch makes the best honey-glaze.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Listen, if you’ve got a minute, would you mind looking into something for me?”

“Sure. I got Old Trusty right here.” Keys clacked. Darien presumed he was signing into his laptop.

“Try to find a Detective Nolan at the Magical Protections Unit.”

“You want me to find dirt on him?”

“I want you to find *anything* on him—I don’t care what it is. A photograph, a date of birth, an address, a fucking marriage certificate, I don’t care.”

“Is there something I should know?”

“Just looking out,” Darien said, accelerating into the lane that was moving faster than the one he was currently in. “For all of us.”

“One Detective Nolan, coming right up.” A burp ripped through the speaker, causing Darien to pull the phone away from his ear.

“Fuck, Atlas. That was nasty.”

“Sorry.” He burped again, but at least this time it was quiet.

“I’ll call you later.” Darien made to hang up when something caught his eye and stilled his hand.

There were several lanes of backed-up traffic up ahead, taillights glowing red.

“Ah, shit.” Darien slammed on the brake, tires losing traction in the puddles that hadn’t dried since the last spell of rain. The steering wheel juddered in hand as the car came to a lurching halt, the bumper missing the car in front of him by a hair’s breadth.

“What?” Tanner asked.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “They still haven’t fixed the lights on Angelthene Boulevard.” They had become finnickily shortly after Kalendae, a side effect that had likely stemmed from the replica of the Arcanum Well. But a few broken lights was a far smaller price to pay than a destroyed city and the deaths of nearly nine million people. “I’ll see you tonight. Save me a donut, will you?”

“Too late. I’m currently feasting on the last one.”

“Asshole.” He hung up in the middle of Tanner’s laughter and tossed the phone into the cupholder, loose change clinking in the bottom of it.

Darien turned up the music until the bass vibrated the speakers. He inched the car forward, staring out his window at the water streaming alongside the curb, storm drains gummed up with garbage and debris. It would take a while to get through the intersection that had turned into a four-way stop, so the music would help him not to think.

It was a soft rock song—his favorite song. He drowned himself in the beat as a new bout of rain fell from the sky. Droplets splashed the windshield and triggered the wipers.

Another rainy day, another broken light, and another person he didn’t fully trust.

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By the time Darien got through the intersection, he was ready to go to sleep. He sped down Angelthene Boulevard, weaving the car through

six lanes of traffic, eager to ditch the heavy congestion that had left his foot inching toward the accelerator, the temptation to cause an accident thrumming in his blood. One more minute in that line of traffic, and he would've been done for.

The drumming of the rain and the growl of the engine nearly drowned out the sound of his phone rattling in the cupholder with an incoming call. He grabbed it, keeping an eye on the cars he was flying by as he read the caller identification.

The name on the screen wasn't one he saw very often. He answered just before her call could go to voicemail, ignoring the feeling of his stomach twisting into a tight knot. "Sab. What's going on?"

"I just got off the phone with Loren," Sabine replied, the sentence crackling from bad reception.

Darien turned the volume up. "What's going on?" he said again, pressing the device against his ear.

"She said her dad called her and told her his townhouse was broken into. I don't know if she wanted me to call you, but I thought you should know. She went by herself to meet him. The whole place is destroyed—"

"I'm on my way." He hung up and set his phone in his lap.

With a quick check in the rear-view mirror, he cranked the steering wheel to the right and pulled a sharp U-turn. Horns blared and tires screeched as vehicles swerved to a stop, barely avoiding collision.

He took a different route this time, staying away from the intersection that had turned into a four-way stop as he flew toward the district of Oceana.

Loren might've asked for space, but she wasn't getting it today, whether she liked it or not. And even though Erasmus was her father, he was a weird guy, and Darien didn't want her alone with him, especially not after that failure of a dinner last week. Until that night, Darien had given Erasmus the benefit of the doubt, but his reluctance to answer any of his daughter's questions had changed how Darien felt about him, and he wasn't about to risk Loren's safety by having her go into his townhouse on her own, especially not after someone had broken into it.

He knew he was really telling himself all these things so that he would have an excuse to see her. Maybe that made him a lousy boyfriend, but she was his to protect. And fuck, he would continue to look after her until the day she told him it was no longer what she wanted.

The townhouse was a wreck.

Shards of glass from the broken window beside the front door crunched under Loren's sneakers as she walked up the cement steps. The door had been left ajar, leaving the destruction inside the house visible from where she stood.

Furniture had been overturned, some of it smashed into pieces. Every window in sight was shattered. Curtains had been torn off rods, dishes had been thrown from cupboards, pictures had been ripped off walls, their frames in splinters.

"Dad?" Loren called as she stepped over the threshold, more glass crunching under her feet. The lack of magic spells over the townhouse made her feel weightless; she was so used to entering through doorways that were programmed to keep intruders out that, whenever there weren't any spells, it felt a little like being naked in public, or like a limb had gone numb from staying in one position for too long.

It was unsettling, and it made her wonder how the intruders had managed to shut off the spells. Hacking spell systems was incredibly difficult, which was why Tanner and the few other people who were as talented as him had such widespread reputations. This had to be the work of a Darkslayer house, or someone equally as powerful.

Erasmus stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by an ocean of broken furniture and glimmering glass.

Heart in her throat, Loren picked her way down the hall, being careful not to step on anything.

"Dad," she called again. "What happened here? Are you hurt?"

There was no sign of trauma on his face, thank the Star. But his eyes were empty and unseeing, his skin ghostly pale. He had called her in distress shortly before school was out, and she'd left as soon as she could.

"Dad," she tried again. She offered him a hand as she drew closer, stepping over a fallen lamp, the shade dented and torn.

He blinked, as if ridding himself of a daze. After a few seconds, he took her outstretched hand into his. His fingers were icy-cold and trembling. "I'm fine, Loren. Luckily, I got here after whoever did this was already gone."

"Where's Cyra?"

"She left the city yesterday." He reached into his shirt pocket and

retrieved the folded-up piece of paper. "I found this on the c-counter."

Loren took the square of paper and unfolded it. She read quickly while Erasmus continued to stare at the wreckage of his home.

*Erasmus,*

*It has been a pleasure helping you find your daughter, but it is time for me to return to my own home. I wish you both all the best, and I sincerely hope she finds it in her heart to forgive you. If you see Loren, please tell her never to let that fire in her soul die out. It will take her big places someday.*

*Ignite me, Phoenix,  
Cyra*

"It's a goodbye letter," she said. She looked up at Erasmus. "Did she tell you why she was leaving?"

He shook his head. "She was already gone when I w-woke up."

"Do you think she had anything to do with this?"

Erasmus pursed his lips in thought. "No. She's been talking about returning home for a while now."

Loren scanned the letter again. "What does this mean? At the end here?" She was about to show Erasmus when the sound of glass crunching under feet had them both turning toward the doorway.

The sight of Darien walking into the townhouse made Loren's stomach and heart dip at the same time. Her mouth dried out, and her palms turned sweaty. She wiped her free one on her thigh as he approached. Sabrina or Dallas must have called him; they were the only people she'd told about the break-in.

The Darkslayer hardly spared a glance for the mess spread around him. His intense gaze was pinned on her as he stepped on shattered pictures, glass buckling under his boots, and literally kicked furniture out of his way—not hard, but enough to move it. The look on his face...she couldn't read it. It was so conflicted and confusing, he almost looked like a total stranger.

Except no stranger could make her heart melt in her chest like this, could make her stomach flutter so chaotically. Her palms tingled with the desire to touch him, and she found her gaze snagging with longing on his inked hands. Those were the hands that held her when she was scared, the hands that took care of her when she was hurt, and she wanted nothing more than to have them on her right this instant and forget about everything that was going on.

Darien was the first to break her stare. He was only several feet away from her when he stopped and blinked his Sight into place.

"Any idea who did this?" Black eyes picked apart the wreckage,

searching for any hints. That deep voice never failed to send heat dripping down her spine, even now—even with that cold edge to it that made her hate herself for the trap she had fallen into.

Erasmus found his voice before Loren could find hers. “Not even the slightest inkling, I’m afraid.”

“Did you have spells on the house?” Boots pounded as Darien walked into the living room, scanning the walls, the windows, the doorways.

“It wasn’t the best protection,” Erasmus admitted, scratching at the back of his neck. “But I did have s-some.”

“How much did you pay?” Darien demanded, stooping low to sift through the mess at his feet. The dusky light of the stormy day streamed through the windows, making his slicked-back hair shine like fresh tar.

“Fifty thousand.”

Darien pinned him with a stare from under dark eyelashes. “Fifty thousand,” he repeated, looking disgusted. “You were practically fucking asking for it.”

“Darien,” Loren whispered, his name floating off her lips before she could stop it.

The glance he spared for her was so short, it could hardly even classify as one. She tried not to feel hurt by this, reminding herself that she was the one who’d left him at Hell’s Gate last night—the one who hadn’t returned his call or initiated conversation with a simple message.

How would she have felt if the roles were reversed?

Darien pushed up from the floor, glass tinkling against his boots. “I’ll get you some security spells from the Umbra Forum,” he said, blinking the Sight out of his eyes. “Once those are installed, it should be safe for you to come back here, but I would keep an eye out from now on, if I were you.”

Erasmus was shaking his head. “I don’t want you to spend your money on me, Darien.”

“And I don’t want my girlfriend coming into a house that’s poorly protected,” Darien replied icily. “You were willing to pay three million gold mynet to find your daughter, but you can’t even be bothered to take the necessary precautions to protect her now that she’s been found?”

Erasmus dropped his gaze to his feet. Shame colored his cheeks.

“It’s okay,” Loren tried, her voice a croak. “We all make mistakes —”

“Yeah, we do, don’t we?” Darien interrupted flatly.

She supposed she deserved that, but she hated how empty his eyes looked as he stared at her. Not blinking. Not moving. Barely

breathing.

Finally, the ice on his face thawed. She wasn't sure what her own face looked like, but he must've seen something there, because he stopped pressing her father about the matter and stepped out of the living room, walking so close as he passed her by that his sleeve nearly brushed hers.

"You need money for a hotel too?" Darien called over his shoulder as he started down the hallway. This time, there was no trace of hostility in his question. The door was still ajar. Rain pounded the front steps, the palm trees across the road whipped about by wind.

"I think I can manage that on my own," Erasmus replied politely.

"You want me to call this in?"

"I c-can."

Loren's feet drifted toward Darien. She had to force them to stop, and just as she managed it, she saw Darien slow his own pace. He lingered halfway down the hallway, hands now in the pockets of his jacket, looking around at the house but not really seeing anything.

She knew the break-in was of very little concern to Darien, and a very small part of the reason why he'd come here.

Erasmus came up beside her and settled his hand on her shoulder. "I'm going to give you two some space. I need to pack some of m-my things anyway." He lumbered for the staircase before she could reply.

With her father now gone, and Darien only feet away from her, she found that she couldn't lift her gaze from the floor. She was at a loss as to what to do. Because her tongue was frozen, she couldn't tell him the truth, but she didn't want to lie to his face either. Talking to him would guarantee questions she couldn't answer, but she couldn't bear this silence any longer.

Darien spoke before she had a chance to say anything, which was well enough, considering she had no idea what might come out of her mouth at this point. She didn't know how much power the imperator's spell had over her speech, and she was reluctant to find out.

"Hey," Darien said softly. The one word was a deep rumble she felt in her belly. It skittered across her skin and made her heart somersault in a way she knew his sharp hearing would pick up on.

Slowly, she raised her eyes to his face.

His broad mouth was set in a firm line, but there was a tenderness in his gaze that hadn't been there before. "Are we okay? You and me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Why?"

"Why?" he repeated with a joyless smile. "What do you mean, *why*? You ran out on me, Loren. We haven't...we haven't talked." There was a pause, and then he added in a hoarse whisper, "You scared me." It was this sentence that finally made her identify that



unfamiliar look on his face. He wasn't being this cold and aloof because he was mad at her.

He was doing it because he was afraid. This was the face of a man who was guarding his heart because he was afraid it was being broken without him fully understanding the reasons why.

And in turn, her own cracked in her chest, especially as she remembered what Ivy had said to her before they'd started dating—that Darien had been hurt more times than he cared to admit.

As she fought for the right words, she felt the fissure spread, until her heart was nearly split right in two. "Everything's fine, Darien." She tried to sound believable, but she wasn't sure she succeeded. "I just...I need space, that's all." If she stayed around Darien, unable to tell him what was going on, he could wind up in danger. The Pale Man had told her that the Devil would die, and she would do everything in her power to make sure the creature's prediction would never come true.

It was better that Darien was alive without her than dead because of her. No matter how much it would break her to stay away from him.

"Can I see you tonight?" The question sent a rush of hot tears to her eyes. "I'll take you to see the stars. The sky's supposed to clear."

"It's Monday." Her voice broke on the last word.

"I'll have you back early, I promise—"

"I said I need space." The next time the emperor summoned her, she needed to have something for him to work with. If she didn't find a way to use her magic, he wouldn't just kill her, but would also kill Darien. She added pathetically, "And I've got a lot of homework to catch up on."

The look on his face told her exactly what he was thinking: since when had homework ever kept her away from him?

"If you don't want to leave the city, that's fine, we can save the stars for another time. Do you want to do dinner? You said you wanted to try the Lakehouse."

She lowered her head, eyelids shutting as she forced back tears. Forced herself to get this over with, no matter how much it would hurt. When she lifted her chin and opened her eyes, she kept her expression cool and composed, every trace of the tears gone. "Maybe next week, okay?"

The silence that stretched between them was horribly loud. It weighed on her lungs and heart, those tears she'd just forced away threatening to come back.

When Darien replied, he replied with a single word, and it was as shaky and broken as she felt. "Okay."

"Can you respect that?" The sound of that question floating off her

lips, so horribly flat and remote, made her want to rip her own heart out so she would stop hurting him.

"Yeah," he breathed. "Yeah, of course."

She had to turn around. Had to make herself walk away, shoving her shaking hands into the pocket of her hoodie, crumpling Cyra's letter in her fist. She moved toward the kitchen, knowing that if she didn't put some space between her and Darien, she would throw herself at him and forget this whole thing.

It broke her heart that he would actually believe this. That he believed himself so undeserving of true love that she would walk away from him so easily after everything he'd done for her, after he'd put that Fleet ring on her finger—

"I love you," Darien said. The statement was charged with so much emotion that the air electrified with it. "You know that, right?"

Slowly, so slowly that it felt like she was barely moving at all, she turned to face him.

"What you saw the other night..." He fought for words. "I need you to know that that wasn't me. That's not all of me, it's just—it's the broken part. But I'm trying to fix it, I promise—"

"Darien." His name wobbled on her tongue. "It's okay."

"I'll give you all the time you need," he persisted. "If you need a week, I'll give you a week. If you need a month, I'll give you a month. If you need a year, I'll give you a year. Just—I can't have you be afraid of me, I can't have this be the end—"

"It isn't the end—"

"Then why does it feel like it?" Pain rippled between them, as real as the air they breathed. "Why do I look at you and see you drifting away from me?" Gods, she couldn't do this. She *couldn't*.

"You're imagining things," she said weakly.

The laugh he gave was cold and unamused. "That seems to be happening a lot lately." Steel-blue eyes that were brimming with hurt studied her face. "I meant it, you know. What I said in the House of Souls." The strong column of his throat bobbed. "I want out. For you."

She broke. Caved. The truth was bubbling up her throat before she could stop it. "Darien—"

*The Terran Imperator has me under a spell*, she tried to say, but her tongue turned numb in her mouth, and the words stuck to her throat, choking her. *He wants me to go into Spirit Terra and find the Arcanum Well. He wants me to lie to you, or he will kill you.*

*Please help me.*

The words were a lump in her throat, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't spit them out. Not one.

Fresh tears burned her eyes, turning Darien's handsome face into a blur that reminded her of watercolor paints bleeding together.

"It's fine," he said quickly, seeing the pain etched into her face, and the shine in her eyes. "It's fine, baby. I said I'd give you time, and I will. But I need you to promise me something." He closed the distance between them, every step hesitant and slow. Carefully, he took her hands out of her pocket and laced her fingers with his. While hers were trembling and cold, his were steady and warm. "If you need anything, if you find yourself in even the smallest amount of trouble, I need you to come to me, okay? I might be broken, but I am good at fixing things, and I will fix anything that tries to hurt you, do you understand me?"

"Yes." The word was a sob—because she would go to him if she could, if she could form the words. But no matter how hard she tried, that spell would not relent, and she was forced to keep a horrible secret she feared would drive them apart.

Darien dipped his chin, those remarkably intense eyes, the color as stormy as the weather, boring into hers. "Promise me."

"I promise."

"Alright." There was more he wanted to say, she knew, his strong jaw flexing with restraint. But whatever it was, he didn't say it. "Then let's start with a week." He looked as ripped apart by this suggestion as she felt. "How does that sound?"

A week wasn't so bad. Maybe it would even be long enough for her to figure out how to fix all of this and return to normal. But the more she thought about it, the more a week felt like a year, and the more her plan to take down the emperor seemed impossible.

Loren's head nodded of its own doing, the feeling robotic and jumpy, another effect of that gods-awful spell. "Okay." The word was out before she could stop it, and it made her want to bite her tongue off.

He made to kiss her, but paused at the last second, instead lifting her left hand to his mouth so he could brush his lips across the back of it. Now that he was standing this close to her, she selfishly breathed in the smell of him—that masculine cologne, the cool bite of the aftershave on his skin, the hint of tobacco in his clothes. The feel of his skin on hers sent a burst of heat through her body.

The next words that left his mouth turned that heat into ice. "I'll let your dad take you home."

When he let go of her, it felt like half of her had been ripped away, leaving behind an empty, bloody shell. She teetered in place, watching as he walked through the wreckage of the townhouse without a backward glance. The rain swallowed up the sound of his footfall as he descended the front steps.

And then he was gone.

Darien couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. Moisture pooled in his eyes, and he hated it for being there, hated himself for being so weak, as he sped through the city, pushing the car as fast as it could go. The peace officers he blew past didn't even try coming after him, blue-and-red lights shutting off as soon as they'd flickered on. The officers were smart enough to know it would be impossible to catch him at this speed.

It was all fine and well for him. If he were to get arrested right now, it wasn't just a speeding ticket and an impounded vehicle that would be slapped onto his record, but also a handful of homicides. Peace officer homicides, no less.

But did it even matter anymore? Did *any* of this matter? These pathetic new morals he'd scrounged up, practically out of thin air, in effort to better his life were all for Loren. But if he didn't have her—

He forced himself to draw a breath, to get a grip before he completely lost the last of his sanity.

Knuckling the stinging moisture out of his eyes, he dipped his head low enough to read the nearest street sign, the numbers blurred by all the rain. Zinnia Street, it said.

He swerved the car down the quiet side road in the Flower District, speeding past parked cars and tiny shops, heading for Witchlight Alchemy and Archives a couple blocks away.

There was a demon standing in the middle of the road. A gray-skinned thing that had to be over seven feet tall. Stringy black hair dripped off a misshapen head. The face vaguely resembled a fawn's, complete with horns that curved into wicked points.

Another one he'd never hunted before. Never seen in any book.

Darien stopped the car.

The thing assessed him with all-white eyes, as if it could see through the spells coating the windshield. Its feet were cloven, and a long tail lined with spikes lashed in the air behind it, charging with the lightning forking through the bruised sky. There was a mark on the creature's forehead, like a jewel pushed into its skin. An amethyst.

"You see me, you ugly fuck?" Darien muttered, pulling a pistol out of the concealed holster near his hip. "I see you, too." He was about to crack open his door when a horn blared.

There was a car behind him. The driver was shouting through the

glass, waving angrily for Darien to get out of the way.

Darien stepped out into the rain just as the guy was laying on the horn again. The sound tapered off into thick silence when the driver took in the Devil storming toward his vehicle.

When Darien reached the door, he pounded on the guy's window, wet glass shuddering under his fist. "*Are you fucking blind?*" he bellowed, raindrops flying off his lips. The man threw up his hands and cowered in his seat, whole body trembling. "Unroll your window," Darien snapped.

A moment passed before the glass lowered—just a crack.

"Do you not see the demon in the middle of the road?" Darien used his pistol to gesture to the goatlike creature standing in front of his car

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And froze mid-gesture.

He blinked. And blinked again. He scanned the sidewalks, the businesses, the cars parked on either side of the street. He even tipped his head back to check the roofs of the buildings, cold rain pelting his face.

The creature was gone. There was no trace of it, not even a hint of an aura when he blinked his Sight into place, scanning the same areas he'd just scanned a moment ago.

"I'm sorry, man," the guy was blubbering. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Did you see it?" Darien demanded, nostrils flaring, hair wet and sticking to his face.

The driver slowly lowered his hands. "See what?"

"The demon." Darien waved again at the now empty road.

"What dem—"

Darien was walking back to his car before the guy could finish his question. Thunder rumbled over the city, and electricity crackled across the forcefield, temporarily lighting up the green and making it visible to the naked eye.

When he was back in his seat, he didn't bother moving the car as he took his phone out and made a call he'd never made before.

---

Witchlight Alchemy and Archives was the polar opposite of Lucent Enterprises. Witchlight might be messy, but it had character, unlike the cold and sterile building that sat in the North End of Angelthene, looking every bit as self-important as the people who ran it.

Darien decided Witchlight suited his good friend Arthur a lot more than Lucent Enterprises. And it was a good thing that his friend, who sat at a worn worktable halfway across the cluttered room, looked so content as Darien walked through the front door, rusted bells

declaring his entrance with a metallic clang.

Because it was *his* fault that Arthur had needed to swim through the job pool, something he shouldn't need to do at his age. And if the man had looked even the slightest bit unhappy, Darien wasn't sure what he would've done with that extra weight stacked on top of everything else that was crushing him.

"I was wondering when you might show up," Arthur said without looking up from his work. Laboratory glassware was spread before him, liquids bubbling in coiled tubes. Arthur was peering through a microscope and scrawling notes on a pad of paper.

"How'd you know it was me?" Darien asked as he crossed the room, boots thudding on creaky floorboards.

Art shot Darien a disbelieving look. "I would know it was you entering a room even if I were blind." He peered through the microscope again. "The air shifts when you're around. Almost like a storm or fast-falling night."

"Very poetic," he crooned. "When did you become a hellseher?"

"Some humans are sensitive to energies, Darien. Just because we can't see them doesn't mean we don't feel them."

Darien paused beside his table. "What are you working on?"

"I'm looking into this here for Roark." He gestured to the small stone he was examining through the microscope. "Have a look." He rolled his chair back a foot.

Darien rounded the table. He shut one eye as he looked through the microscope. "A rock?" He blinked, stepping back.

Arthur shrugged. "Looks like it."

It was shaped like a crescent moon, its iridescent appearance similar to volcanic glass.

"Why does he have you looking into a rock?"

Arthur shrugged. "My clients tell me very little, Darien. Need to know basis."

"Right."

He bumped a playful fist against Darien's arm. "Though I'm just as curious as you," he whispered.

Darien smiled. "If you decide to spy, let me know if you find anything out. I would love to know what that guy gets up to in his spare time."

"I will. We'll call it our Rock Hunt."

"Great code name."

"I try."

Darien's smile faded. The sudden absence of humor didn't go unnoticed by his old friend.

"I get the feeling you're here for some advice," Arthur said.

"Not advice. Just to talk."

“What would you like to talk about?”

Darien leaned back against the table and pushed his hair out of his face. “I think I’m going crazy. My Surges have never been this bad. I’m having one nearly every day, sometimes more than once a day.”

“Your dad struggled with them too.” What a surprise. Nothing Randal had left him had brought him any joy. Arthur continued, “At least, he did in the beginning. He suffered from them terribly. Your mother had a way of consoling him the same way she consoled you, which I believe was a large part of the reason why he fell for her.”

Darien shifted on his feet. “Do you believe he truly loved her?”

Arthur considered his question. “Yes,” he began, somewhat apprehensively. “I believe he did love her. In his own way.”

Darien scowled at the shelves of books that were pressed up against the back wall. “She deserved better.”

“Not everything that came of their relationship was bad,” Arthur said softly. Darien glanced down at him. “She got you and Ivyana.”

Darien returned to scowling at the shelves. “I was a shit son.”

“Your mother didn’t think so.”

“I promised myself a long time ago that I would never have kids.”

“And why is that?”

“I’d make a terrible father. I mean, look at me.” He gestured to all of him, because it was all of him that was broken.

“I’m looking,” Arthur said patiently. “And I see a man who is very self-aware, one who strives every day to be a better person than he already is.” An understanding smile played on his lips. “That’s why you should have one. One day, when you’re ready. You have to learn to love yourself first.” Easier said than done when he was the type of person not worth loving. Arthur sat back in his chair and laced his wrinkled fingers in his lap, the wedding ring he never took off, even all these years later, shining like new gold. “Does Loren want children one day?”

Probably. And she deserved them—she deserved whatever she wanted, the most beautiful life she could get.

Darien shrugged. “We aren’t talking.”

“Not talking,” Arthur mused. “I find that difficult to believe.”

“I don’t. I had a feeling it would happen eventually.”

“Is she not talking to you, or is it you who’s not talking to her?”

“I’m giving her space. She...walked in on something I didn’t mean for her to see. I was...collecting.” That was the cleanest way to put it. The sight of her horrified face when she had walked in on him flashed through his mind, the memory churning his stomach. “And what excuse do I have, really? That I have to do it because it’s my job?” He shook his head in disgust. “Fuck, my job...”

“She knew you were a Darkslayer the moment she met you. She

even knew *before* she met you. It's not like you were keeping it from her."

"No, but the only side of me that I ever allowed her to see was the better side, the hero who saved her. Not the man who kills because he can't sleep at night." He sighed. "I've lost track of the number of lives I've taken, Arthur. That's how many there are."

"Is the world not a better place because of it?"

"Killing is killing, no matter who it is. I might be cleaning up the streets of some bad people, but in doing so, I've become bad myself. Some days, I feel like I don't have a soul, if I ever even had one."

Hellsehers couldn't see their own aura; even looking in a mirror, they couldn't see it. And he'd never asked anyone to read his and explain the colors to him; he didn't want to know what his bare inner self looked like. But he thought that if he could see it, it would be all the shades that indicated damage and corruption. All the vile and unpleasant things a person could be, he was sure that was what he was.

"You have one, Darien," Arthur said. "You do. You wouldn't be talking to me like this if you didn't." He eased himself out of the chair, grunting with the effort, and started tidying up his workspace. "It's not too late for you, you know. Randal's gone. There are a few things that you need to take care of, but after that?" He smiled. "After that, you have your whole life ahead of you, Darien. And you also have a girl who I know will stick by you through everything, speedbumps and all."

There would be a lot of speedbumps, he knew. "I hope you're right." He found his keys in his pocket and shoved away from the table.

"Where are you off to now?"

"I have an appointment."

Arthur closed the books that were spread out on the table and started stacking them. "New haircut?"

"Never," Darien laughed. "I'm going to get my eyes checked."

Arthur lifted his head. "Your eyes checked," he repeated with a chuckle. "That's a good one."

When Darien didn't reply, merely tipping up a brow, a smile playing on his mouth, Arthur's expression emptied with shock.

"I'll be damned," Arthur murmured. "You're serious."

—

In the waiting room of Angelthene Optometry, Darien sat in one of the plastic chairs that were set up around a low table, the surface of which was littered with the latest magazines on gossip, fashion, and



cooking.

Three other patients were present, all of them seeming far more interested in why there was a Darkslayer here than they were the magazines spread open on their laps. One of the old men didn't even bother pretending to be occupied; he flat out stared at Darien with a gaze he never broke, not even to blink. At least his mouth wasn't hanging open—Darien had to give him that.

A few minutes passed before a black-haired half-witch wearing thick-framed glasses trotted up to the reception desk, stiletto heels clip-clopping on the shiny floors. Judging from the look on her face, and the way she kept glancing at the waiting area while she spoke to one of the human receptionists, she thought a joke was being played on her.

Darien watched as she gestured to her clipboard with a graceful wave of a light brown hand. The four words she uttered were too low for anyone else in the waiting area to hear, but Darien picked up on them without a problem. "Are you *kidding* me?" she hissed.

Darien nearly snorted. This was going to be good.

A couple minutes passed before she was walking his way, chin up, white lab coat swishing around her hips. She stopped several feet from him. When she spoke, she made a point not to look at anyone, least of all the Darkslayer dressed in all black—the Darkslayer who looked like he had been sent here to off someone, not get his vision checked.

"I'm looking for Darien Cassel," the woman said. She had a breezy voice, the kind that made it difficult to believe she had the ability to yell.

Darien refrained from rolling his eyes. Instead, he gestured to the older man who was still staring at him. How the fuck was he not blinking? "*He's* Darien Cassel," Darien said of the man.

The man finally blinked, sat back in his chair, and looked up at the woman in disbelief, jowls jiggling. "My name is Fred. *That's* Darien Cassel." He pointed a wrinkled finger at Darien.

Darien rolled his eyes all the way to the back of his head. "You people have no sense of humor." He got to his feet.

Now that he was standing at full height, the woman lifted her chin higher, her red-painted mouth straightening into a line. She was young—probably not much older than Loren. Twenty-one, maybe twenty-two.

"Very well," she said, squeezing her clipboard. "Follow me."

—

Twenty minutes later, and the exam was done. The optometrist—Doctor Tamika Isley—flicked off the eye chart projector, plunging the

small room into darkness. With a glance in his direction, clearly unsettled by the fact that she couldn't see him in the unlit room, she got up to turn on the lights. When they buzzed to life, she returned to her chair, the click of her heels on the floor the only sound to fill the sudden silence.

"You have perfect vision," she said with a long exhalation, tucking her black skirt under her as she sank into the seat. She crossed her legs and folded her hands on her bare knee. "But I don't think that comes as a surprise to you."

"You didn't see anything out of the ordinary?" Darien pressed, the question edged with irritation. "Nothing at all?"

She shook her head. "When did you say you started seeing these... creatures?"

"I didn't," Darien clarified, just because he felt like being a dick. "But my first sighting was a few days ago."

She wet her lips and looked about the room, fluorescent lights reflecting in her lenses. When she voiced her next question, she kept her focus on the white walls, fingers trembling on her knee. Darien had no idea what had unsettled her so thoroughly, aside from his unexpected presence here, until the question finally came out.

"Have you considered seeing a psychiatrist?" Oh, for shit's sake.

"Trust me," Darien said with restrained impatience. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, forcing her to make eye contact with him. "This is something else." He wasn't as certain of this as he sounded, but his gut was telling him a psychiatrist wasn't necessary.

Breaking his stare again, she turned and fiddled with the papers that were fastened to her clipboard. "I'm sorry that I can't be of more help to you." Darien knew the statement was meant to be a dismissal.

"It's fine," he mumbled, rising to his feet. He crossed the room and grabbed his jacket off the hook by the door, shoving his arms through the sleeves. "Can't say I expected anything different."

"I hope you find the answers you're looking for." The glasses she wore reminded him of a certain hacker who could really benefit from more of a social life. He spent way too much time on screens.

"Are you single?" Darien asked.

Sleek dark hair fanned out as she turned her head his way, measuring him up over the rim of her glasses with eyes that were slightly upturned at the outer corners. "Is this your way of asking me out?"

"Not me. I'm asking for a friend."

Her brows flicked up. "I don't date Darkslayers."

"How'd you know he's a Darkslayer?"

"I highly doubt you have many friends who aren't Darkslayers."

“Touché.” Darien opened the door and stepped out. “If you change your mind, his name’s Tanner Atlas.”

She returned to her papers, hair hiding her face. “I’m married.”

Darien smirked. *With what ring?* He almost said it out loud, but he resisted. The list of people who would pay good mynet to have his severed head on their wall was long enough already. He didn’t need this optometrist on the list too.

He walked out, the clients and employees in the building avoiding him as if he had the plague.

That was the last time he’d be doing anything like this again, and that included trying to hook Tanner up with a nice normal girl who wasn’t involved in bloodshed and violence—exactly the kind the guy needed.

He hadn’t expected much from this visit but...he’d hoped. Maybe that made him an idiot, but at least he’d tried.

Darien shook back his sleeve and checked the time.

He had one hour before he had to meet a couple of his father’s men at the club known as White Garden. It was time to convince them to run the route tonight, and get this show on the road.

---

“We want twenty.”

“Randal was paying you fucking fifteen,” Darien said. He stood across from two of Randal’s former business partners. Two hellseher grunts who’d done the majority of his dirty work when it came to weapons dealing and retaliation.

They were in White Garden, a dimly lit club with an abundance of exotic dancers and really loud drunks. There was a fighting ring in the center of the room, the killing going on in the squared circle bathing the humid air with a salty wash of blood and sweat. Malakai was here too, though he was currently in another area of the club, simply playing watchdog in case Darien needed assistance. He didn’t think he would; he wasn’t afraid of these dickheads. But it never hurt to come prepared, and he’d be an idiot not to.

“Yeah,” Carlo sneered. “And we want twenty.”

“Tell you what,” Darien replied coldly. “You make this run for me, show me I can trust you, and we’ll talk about your twenty percent after.”

Carlo and Joseph glanced at each other. Darien could tell from the feel of their auras that, although they were still reluctant to accept the offer due to pride, they were leaning toward it. In fact, he’d detected, from the moment he’d walked in, that their arguments were half-hearted. With Randal gone, and their income bled dry, they didn’t

have much of a choice but to do as Darien asked.

"You work for me now," Darien said. "And unless you'd like to look for other work, you'll take what I give you."

"What's the route?" Joseph asked.

Darien gave it to them. Before leaving, he stepped close, getting right up in their faces. "Don't be fucking late."

He left. He was nearly at the front doors when he saw a group of people turning toward him, their conversations fading into silence.

The auras in the group were hostile. Their bad energy sent an instant rush of adrenaline through Darien's veins. As he drew closer, he recognized a few of the faces in the group.

Jude Monson, Head of the Viper's Nest—or Den, the terms often used interchangeably. Jessa Gilchrist, another Viper and Darien's former fuckbuddy. Under the unflattering lights, her russet hair was more orange than red.

The others he recognized were Huntsmen, Lionel and Harley Savage among them.

A prickle of warning climbed up Darien's spine. The Huntsmen didn't mingle with Vipers. They'd never got along, their hatred for each other fueled by Jude's close friendship with Darien.

It seemed something had changed. And Darien would be willing to bet it had to do with his claim on the Darkslaying throne.

Jude walked up to him, stepping right in his path. "Heard you chose Malakai to be your Right Hand."

Darien stopped. "So what?"

The others were watching. Lionel drifted closer, a cruel smile curving his mouth, several of his men mirroring him. Lionel was puffing on a cigar, a glass of scotch in hand.

Jude scoffed. "I thought we were friends, Darien. And I thought you hated Delaney's guts—"

"Things change."

"I trusted you," Jude growled. "I trusted you for years—"

"You still can," Darien snapped. "I'm a pretty trustworthy person, Jude. You, on the other hand?" He gave a pointed look at the people inching closer. "I promote Malakai and you run off to make friends with Huntsmen? Which of us is the person who can't be trusted now?"

Lionel came closer. "Leave him be, Jude," he drawled, tone thick with humor. His eyes raked over Darien with the same cold judgement the man had given him back when he was a teenager. "He'll get his."

"If that's a threat, I'd take it back."

Lionel smiled. "More like a warning." He winked.

Darien glanced at Jude. "I'd rethink this if I were you." Lionel never made allies, and if he did you could be rest assured he'd throw you to the sharks as soon as he was done with you.

But Jude only gave a cold smirk. "I don't need your advice."

Lionel drawled, "How's that delicious little human cunt, Darien?"

Darien saw Lionel's words for the threat he'd meant them to be. As Randal's former Right Hand, Lionel would've surely known a great deal about what happened with the Well replica.

And who was the key to using the real one. Which made Darien eternally grateful that Loren's magic was gone—at least, as far as anyone but he and the Devils knew. It was the reason the imperator had come to her school shortly after Kalendae; the reason he had left her alone after making her promise not to speak of the events of that day to anyone.

Lionel's eyes flicked to something behind Darien. Soon, others were looking too.

Darien sensed the Reaper before he spoke.

"I didn't realize we were having a reunion," Malakai said, taking up position at Darien's right. While every smile in their group faded, Malakai's grew. "How you doing, Lionel?"

"We were just talking about your promotion," Lionel said. He drained his scotch and gave him a mocking smile. "Congratulations."

"You almost sound sincere," Malakai clipped. It was to Darien that Malakai said, "Let's piss off."

They started walking, weaving through the bodies of Vipers and Huntsmen, none of them moving to give them space. No one except Jessa, who looked like she had something to say but didn't open her mouth. The look in her gaze suggested she was here because she felt she had to be, not because she wanted to be.

As Darien passed Lionel, he slowed, moving in close to the Huntsman. So close he could smell the scotch on his breath. "Talk about her again," Darien said, his words lethally quiet, "I'll make you bleed."

—

The dark storm was misleading, the lack of light making it seem a lot later in the day than it actually was.

When Darien made it out of the club and into the parking lot, he called after Delaney, who was heading for his motorcycle, "Valen and Sylvan!" He knew the Reaper would know what he was talking about.

"I got it," Malakai called back. "I'll have them call you later."

As Darien strode over to where he'd parked his car near the back of the lot, he dug around in his pockets until he found his phone. Lightning forked through the rain-bloated clouds, bathing the district of Oldtown in violet. He unlocked his phone and scrolled through his list of contacts until he found Finn's number.

The detective answered the call on the fourth ring, picking up mid-sentence as he addressed someone else. “No, no,” Solace was saying. “Not yet. I want to look around some more.” There was a crackling sound, and then he mumbled, “Solace.”

“It’s Darien.”

A brief pause. Darien heard grass crunching underfoot. “What’s happening?”

“I have a couple of my father’s former business partners running the route tonight.” He was at his car now. The doors unlocked with a chirp.

“That’s great, but—” Another crackle. “I’m a little busy here.”

“What’s going on?” Darien got in the car. “You sound stressed.”

“No offense, but this doesn’t really concern you.”

“Yeah, no offense, but we’re kind of partners now, so why don’t you give me the gist of what’s going on?”

Another pause, and then Finn relented with a sigh that blew like wind through the speaker. “I’ve got my crew investigating some dead animals. We’ve taped off a zone near the Chalk Door where a bunch of wildlife appear to have died without cause.”

Darien was about to start the car when he froze, key halfway in the ignition. “Wait, wait, wait. The Chalk Door?”

“Wow,” Dallas murmured in wonderment as the penthouse in the northeastern end of the Financial District came into view, visible through the smoky glass doors of the elevator. “This place is incredible.”

As that elevator slowed to a smooth stop, she beamed up at Max, whose insides turned all fluttery at the sight of the dimples marking both of her lightly freckled cheeks.

The doors slid open. Dominic was waiting on the other side, hands in the pockets of his jeans, a big grin on his face.

“Well?” The Angel of Death’s husky voice bounced hollowly through the immaculate penthouse. “Is it everything you imagined Death’s Landing would be?”

Dallas was the first to step in, followed closely by Logan, Sabrine, Ivy, and Jack. Max was last, and he found that he couldn’t look away from Dallas’s awed expression as she tipped her head back to gaze up at the high ceiling, the tinted glass allowing tonight’s impressive sunset to flaunt itself. Now that the storm had passed, the sky was vibrant, the city washed with every shade of orange and pink. The black tile floors were struck through with veins of gold, and the walls were covered in black velvet paper with a feathery texture.

Eyes wide, mouth hanging open, Dallas said to Dominic, “It is *nothing* like I imagined Death’s Landing would be.”

“She was expecting cobwebs, coffins, and skulls,” Max said with a smirk. “Weren’t you, Dal?”

Ivy snickered. “If that’s what she was expecting from Death’s Landing, then I’d hate to know how people imagine Hell’s Gate.”

It was sometimes odd when they remembered their home was tied to such a dangerous reputation. People created the most outrageous scenarios in their heads about Hell’s Gate, a few of those scenarios getting tossed around so much during idle gossip that some people ended up deciding the rumors were fact. It didn’t bother Max or the others though; if it kept the morbidly curious public from wanting to find out the location of Hell’s Gate, and kept them even more afraid of the Darkslayers who lived there, it not only made their lives easier, but also solidified their hard-earned reputations.

Dallas stepped up to a console table. The glass vase that sat on one end acted like a prism in the sunset, its sharp edges separating white light into a spectrum of colors that brought life to the dark walls. “Not

exactly,” Dallas said distractedly, addressing Ivy’s statement. The light burnished Dal’s hair, turning it into liquid fire. “I mean...maybe some skulls, yeah. But that’s about it.”

Jack was grinning. “He keeps those in the dungeon.”

“Well, Dom?” Ivy chirped. Eyes bright, she looked around expectantly, hands clasped below her chin. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

A look of horror crossed Dominic’s face. “Shh!” A finger shot to his lips. “She might hear you. She’s getting pretty good at learning our boring language. Pretty soon, she’s going to figure me out.” Beckoning them to follow, he started leading the way through the apartment.

“And what about you?” Ivy asked, keeping pace with Dominic as the rest of the group followed behind them. “Are you getting any better at her language, or have you thrown in the towel?”

“I’m not throwing in any towel. If she’s learning our language, I’m learning hers. It’s only fair.”

Where she was walking at Max’s side, Dallas poked her head between Ivy and Dominic, narrowly avoiding getting smacked in the cheek with one of Dominic’s wings as she said to him, “How’s that colored bird translation coming along?”

Max choked on a laugh.

Dominic threw him a look and jerked his thumb at Dallas. “She’s never going to let that one go, is she?”

“It’s the burning question of the year, Dom,” Maximus replied with a croon. “Macaw or parakeet?”

Dominic’s voice was a bass mumble. “I’m starting to wonder why I let you guys in here.”

He turned into the rec room, where several Angels milled about, two of them—Hanli and Dylan—playing videogames on the flatscreen television, while another two—Nathan and Melanie—were engrossed in a game of billiards. Conrad Valencia was seated at the poker table with Lace and Blue, hands of cards held before them. Ice melted in whiskey glasses, and smoke curled from ashtrays.

Conrad was all business as he held up a finger at their group, bringing them to a standstill several feet away from the poker table. “Quiet,” he said without looking at them. “I’m about to win.” His husky voice was nearly identical to his brother’s. They shared a lot of the same features—same crystal-blue eyes, same brown skin, same square jaw darkened with stubble. One of the only things that set the two apart, aside from the silver ring pierced through Conrad’s lower lip, was their hair; while Dominic’s wore his shoulder-length, Conrad’s was shorter and tousled.

Lace slapped down her cards, a smug smile on her lips. Cinder, her cat Familiar, was curled up on the back of her neck with impressive balance, tail twitching over her shoulder. “Let’s see them,” Lace



drawled, beckoning with her manicured fingertips.

The cocky glint in Conrad's eyes turned to blazing fire as he took in Lace's hand of cards.

"Come on, Conrad," Lace crooned, her gray eyes sparkling with triumph. "Don't be a sore loser."

"Fucking hell." He threw down his cards and sat back in his seat, scrubbing his hands over his face. His wings snapped out behind him with frustration, the motion stirring up a rush of heat that fluttered hair and clothing and sent the curtains on the floor-to-ceiling windows tumbling through the air.

Blue was the last to set down her cards, looking entirely unconcerned by the outcome of the game as she smiled up at Dominic.

Lace gave a whoop of victory and threw her fists in the air, earning a disgruntled cry from Cinder. "Pay up, asshole!"

Conrad pushed to his feet and buried his hands in his pockets, digging around for his wallet. He slapped five hundred gold mynet on the table before Lace and pinned Max with a cold stare. "She is not allowed in here anymore," he said, pointing at Lace.

Max smiled. "Dom was right, you *are* a sore loser."

"I'm outta here." He stormed behind the bar and swung open the fridge door, the inside bursting with cans and bottles of beer. "That's the third game she's beat me at today." Even though every action exuded anger, Max knew the Angel well enough to tell he was joking as he selected his poison from the fridge and kicked the door shut.

Jack was grinning at him. "Drinking and driving?"

"Drinking and flying," Conrad corrected as he headed for the sliding glass doors. "They can't ding me for that." There was no balcony; the doors led straight into open air, which was perfect for a house filled with winged people.

"They can if you crash into something," Jack said.

"I won't."

"Want to bet?"

"Not today, you addict." He pulled the doors open, and a gust of fresh air swept into the room, scattering the cards. "Catch you guys later." He held his arms out at his sides and fell backward out the doors, wings spreading out to full length as he spiraled into the city.

Dominic threw himself into Conrad's seat. "Ladies and gentlemen, my fuckface of a brother." He gestured to the free stools that were tucked in at the bar. "Pull up a seat, let's catch up."

Two minutes later, and everyone was seated around the poker table, save the other Angels, who continued playing videogames and billiards.

Dominic addressed the group as a whole, starting from the beginning of what he'd managed to learn about Blue so far. "She said

she was taken from her home by three men who planned on bringing her to Angelthene to look for a colored bird.” Before Dallas had a chance to say anything, he held up a finger. “Do *not* say a word, Bright.”

Dallas’s hands shot up in surrender. “Not saying any words!”

Dominic continued. “She said she wasn’t the only girl who was taken. They were staying at a motel—she doesn’t know the name and can’t remember the location—when one day they took the other girl out of the room, leaving her behind.”

Blue leaned toward Dominic to tell him something in Ilevyn, making him pause.

Dominic translated for her. “But they didn’t leave her alone. One of the men stayed and guarded her. And when the other man came back, he didn’t have the girl with him anymore. That was how she knew she was in trouble and needed to escape. She believes the men killed the girl.”

Ivy said, “Did she say whether she knew this girl, or was she a stranger?”

Dominic translated the question to Blue, amending a few words until he got it across correctly. His brow creased as he listened carefully to Blue’s reply. She spoke quietly, overly aware of the many eyes on her face. “She said the girl was picked up on their way to Angelthene.” Blue whispered something else in his ear, and then Dom corrected, “*Taken* on their way to Angelthene.”

Max shared a glance with Dallas.

The witch was facing Dominic again. “Taken? Like, abducted?”

Dominic murmured the question to Blue. When she was finished replying to him, his ice-blue eyes scanned their group. “Abducted.”

Max shared another look with Dallas. Her expression told him her thoughts had gone to exactly the same place as his. “Another missing person situation,” he said. “Weren’t we just talking about—”

Dallas stood so fast, her stool almost toppled to the floor. She was halfway across the rec room before anyone could move. “The Fleet!”

Everyone stood and followed her, their questions tripping over one another.

“Am I missing something?” Jack was saying.

“I feel totally lost,” Lace complained.

Dominic urged Blue out of her chair. “Can someone fill me in?” he called after the group, hurrying to catch up. “Where are you going?”

Dallas whirled around, nearly causing Max to bump into her. “Do you have a computer here?” she asked Dominic, leaning around Max.

“What house doesn’t have a computer in it?”

She scowled. “Don’t be a dick.”

“Yes, I have a computer, Dallas. But I’m not letting you use it until

you tell me what's on your mind."

Max explained before Dallas could blow up, "A few people have disappeared from Angelthene's Aerial Fleet while off duty. We overheard Dallas's dad talking about it at the Fleet event."

Logan said, "Why hasn't this been on the news?"

"Because someone doesn't want anyone to know," Sabrina chimed in. "I mean, it's Fleet soldiers we're talking about. That would cause panic."

"Why would people be kidnapping Fleet soldiers?" Lace asked. "And what does this have to do with Blue?"

Dallas snapped her fingers. "Computer. Now."

Flabbergasted, Dominic gestured to the hallway to their left. "The office is down there. What do you think you're going to find?"

She started marching down the hallway, feet thumping. "We need to get into the Fleet database."

It was Max's turn to be flustered. "Dallas, you can't break into the Fleet database with Dominic's home computer."

But she was already in the office. "And why not?" she called.

Everyone took off after her at once, the assortment of footwear clapping against the walls.

Max rounded the corner into the windowless office and found her sitting before the desktop, fingers hovering over the keys.

He couldn't help but smile at the back of her head. "Well, for starters, you can't even figure out Dom's password, can you?"

Dominic chuckled behind him as he edged into the room. "She'll never guess it."

"He'll give it to me," she snapped at Max. "Won't you, Dom?"

"And in case you aren't aware," Max continued. "Their database is one of the hardest to hack into."

Dallas swiveled her chair around and crossed her arms. "Well?" she said to Max.

"Well what?"

She looked pointedly at his jacket. "You know who to call."

With a sigh, Max got his phone out of his pocket. "Let today's illegal activities begin."

Darien was in Hooded Skullcap in under an hour.

The place was crawling with suits working for the Magical Protections Unit. A handful of peace officers were here as well, the light bars on the roofs of their cruisers oscillating red and blue. The majority of the golden field was sectioned off with yellow reflective tape, along with a wall of spells that kept people who shouldn't be here from walking on the premises.

All Darien could focus on was the bus stop where he'd found Loren, and all he could think about was what she'd shared with him about her time spent beyond the Chalk Door. And even though he couldn't figure out why or how she would be connected to this, there was a part of him that couldn't shake the feeling that she was.

Walking at Finn's side on the dirt road near the bus stop, he looked out at the grass swaying under a setting sun. Although the storm that had darkened Angelthene an hour ago had passed, the ground was still soggy, and so was the air, the excessive moisture turning his lungs into sponges.

"There's no sign of disease?" Darien prompted.

"There's no apparent cause of death at all. Animals are showing up dead in nearby backyards. Birds are dropping from trees. Pets that are young and healthy, just keeling over like they've been shot."

"How far out?"

"About a two mile radius. Includes the Chalk Door."

The Chalk Door—where Loren had used a mysterious crumb of Tempus's power to freeze the Pale Man in his tracks.

"You look like you're putting a puzzle together in your head," Finn said, cutting into his thoughts. He stopped walking, hands in his coat pockets. "Is there something I should know?"

There was a fist in his stomach, squeezing and twisting, knotting it up into a tightly packed ball that made him want to throw up. "No," he lied. "I just wanted to see it for myself."

Darien didn't stay long, but when he got back in his car, he blinked his Sight into place, looking long and hard at the taped-off area that stretched all the way to the Chalk Door and beyond. He prayed to every deity he knew that this had nothing to do with Loren.

The engine snarled as Darien started the car. Night was falling fast; in two hours, two of Randal's men would be running the route Gaven

had given him. If all went according to plan, he would be one step closer to ending this bullshit and throwing Gaven and his people behind bars, a few of Randal's old dickheads with them.

Car idling, he took his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his unread messages, searching for the only name that mattered. But she hadn't contacted him. When he'd suggested taking a week away from each other, it hadn't sounded so bad, but now he didn't know if he could handle it. It was funny; he spent nearly a whole week away from her all the time, the classes she attended at AA taking up four or five days, depending on the semester. But now that her absence was due to an entirely different reason, the distance made him desperate to see her—and made him feel like he was dying now that it was no longer an option.

He knew he shouldn't do it, but he clicked on her contact card—the photo he'd taken of her beautiful face smiling at him under the stars—and hit CALL.

Fuck, he was lousy at staying away from her. Being in love with her felt a little like losing his mind.

The answering machine picked up, and he clung to every word that came through the speaker, the sound of her voice instantly slowing his erratic heartbeat. His thumb hovered over the button that would end the call, but he didn't press it in time before the phone beeped. The recording started, and he was speaking before he could stop himself.

"I know I said that I would leave you alone," Darien began. "And I will. But I wanted to apologize for how I behaved at your dad's. I don't want you to think that I'm mad at you, sweetheart. I love you so fucking much, Loren, and I need you to know that I would do anything for you, anything that you ask, even if you want me to leave you alone for good, I'll do it. But I can't stop thinking about how awful I was to you, Loren. I'm ashamed of how I just stormed out on you, and I needed...I needed to apologize. I don't want my behavior to influence whether or not you come back to me." He drew a deep, rattling breath as he stared out at the red-and-blue lights, wishing she would just pick up. "Call me whenever you want, and I'll be here." He hung up before he could say anything else, that stinging feeling in his eyes again.

A fist thudded on his window.

He looked up to see Finn standing beside the car. He flicked the button on the door, and the glass lowered all the way.

"What now?" Darien asked.

"Dead vampire."

"Where? Here?"

Finn shook his head. "Silverwood."

Loren had listened to the voicemail Darien had left her three times. She was frustrated with herself for missing his call, but she had spent all afternoon—since the moment school got out—poring over books in the library of Angelthene Academy, searching for anything that might help her break the spell on her ability to speak.

And it was the library where she was sitting now, having returned here after supper to continue perusing every spell book on the shelves, every grimoire she could find tucked into the dustiest corners of the spacious room. She even got permission to borrow a couple from the restricted section, much to the annoyance of the ghost haunting the area, who often peered at her from behind the shelves with pit-like eye sockets.

She was sitting alone at a table, staring at her phone, thumb hovering over Darien's name, when someone threw themselves into the seat across from her, and she jumped out of her skin.

Klay folded his arms on the table. "Tick-tock," he drawled. "Time's a wasting." His eyes went to the books spread across the table before she had a chance to cover them up.

*Crap.*

When he lifted his gaze to her face, there was a shadow in his eyes that wasn't related to the Sight. "This wasn't part of our agreement."

"Can you really blame me?" she hissed. "Or are you that cold-hearted?"

The look he gave her felt like a dagger being thrown at her head.

And then his eyes flashed to the phone in her hands. "If you call him," Klay said coldly, "the emperor will hear about it."

Her upper lip curled back over her teeth. "And do you always do as daddy says?"

Like the crack of a whip, Klay's magic lashed into her mind.

She bolted upright in her seat, phone clattering to the table. There was a mental claw squeezing her brain, piercing it with the feeling of tiny daggers digging in. She tried to break free, but she couldn't move.

Slowly, Klay rose to his feet, eyes shining black as he continued to hold her there, turning her into a sentient statue.

Around frozen lips, she managed to stammer, "Let go of me." But that claw only squeezed harder, and blood trickled out of both nostrils.

A cold smile spread across Klay's face.

"Let go of me," she said again. "If you kill me, you'll ruin your father's plans."

That horrible magic relented, and she sagged in her seat. She looked about the library, but no one had seen what he'd done to her.

The place was nearly deserted, the only other students in the area too busy clacking away on laptops to take note of what was happening around them.

Klay flattened his hands on the table and leaned forward, bringing his head down to her level. "Let your next move be a smart one, Loren. Wouldn't want your Devil to die, would you?"

Her labored breathing turned to gasps, and the floor spun beneath the soles of her shoes. "I hate you."

Those eyes, so empty of any emotion except anger and disgust, went to the books spread out before her again. "You'll never find anything. Stupid girl."

"How do you know?" she sneered, casting a line to reel him in. The blood trickling from her nostrils glided over her lip. She knuckled it away and wiped it on her academy cardigan. "Every spell has a counter spell. It's only fact."

"Maybe. But it would have to be a spell that you were under in order for that to work." Hah! He'd just given her more information than he'd likely meant to.

She was careful to keep every trace of the victory she was feeling from showing on her face. But the more she thought about it, the less it felt like a victory.

Klay had just revealed that it wasn't a spell freezing her tongue. But if it wasn't a spell, then what was it? And how could she break it?

Klay pushed away from the table. "One day down, nine remaining. Make good use of them, would you?"

He was gone before she could say anything else.

—

A dead vampire in Werewolf Territory was as bad as it sounded, and not because of how gruesome the body looked.

Yellow tape surrounded the area where the Magical Protections Unit had discovered the body. They were just down the road from Black Mirror Pond and Campsite, south of Eastside Academy and west of Black Mirror Hills. The area was fairly deserted at this time of year, but there was a handful of people staying in motor vehicles and spell-protected tents. All of those people were currently being questioned by law enforcement. Pens scratched on paper as detectives and officers wrote down everything they learned from the campers, their faces lit up by red and blue light.

"You know what this means," Finn said quietly to Darien, where they stood on the outskirts of the crime scene, leaning back against the hood of Darien's car. Finn's eyes met his. "It means, if someone in Drakon cares enough to look into this, we could have a war on our

hands.”

Nothing like this had happened in centuries. The vampires and wolves who were a part of the major vampire houses and wolf packs in Angelthene kept well away from each other’s land, the pact preventing them from so much as mingling. Now that a dead vampire had turned up on werewolf soil, Logan and the other wolves in his Guardian pack would have a huge problem on their hands.

Logan, who was not answering his phone.

“You need to find out who did this,” Darien said. “Before it escalates.” Before it turned into a fight for revenge that couldn’t be stopped by apologies or excuses.

The corpse had been torn apart, as if by claws, another sign that didn’t work in Logan’s favor. If the autopsy revealed that the death was indeed caused by a werewolf, hundreds—if not thousands—of lives would be lost when Calanthe decided to send her people into the Silverwood District to retaliate.

Darien’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He scrambled to get it out, holding out hope that if it wasn’t Loren calling him, then maybe it would at least be Logan. But he wasn’t the least bit surprised to find neither of their names flashing across the screen.

With a grinding of his teeth, he swiped to answer. “Cassel,” he said, trying his best not to sound as disappointed as he felt.

“Route’s underway,” came Sylvan’s gravelly voice. “Shipment’s been picked up. We’re tailing them now.”

“Good. Don’t let them out of your sight.” Darien didn’t trust Randal’s men. After selecting two of his best options from his pool of shit to run the route tonight, he’d told Malakai to get Sylvan and Valen to keep an eye on them to make sure everything went smoothly.

“Malakai called,” Sylvan said. “He wants to know where we go from here.”

“We meet at the Advocate tomorrow night. Eleven p.m. Tell him I’ll pick him up.”

“Will do.”

“Don’t blink,” Darien said in a hard voice. He hung up.

Finn was eyeing him. “All good?”

“So far.”

Once this route was completed, he would be one step closer to fixing his trainwreck of a life and bringing Loren back home.

At least, that was what he told himself.



When Maximus woke up in one of the spare bedrooms at Death's Landing, he found that Dallas was no longer sprawled across the mattress beside him.

Moon and starlight streamed in through the bare windows and glass ceiling, and far off in the distance and down below, buildings twinkled with thousands of lights, a few cars that dared to be out this late streaming through Angelthene's downtown core. Vampire silhouettes soared over skyscrapers and blotted out a barely-there moon. The rain speckling the roof and windows suggested yet another storm had passed.

He and the others had decided to stay the night here when Tanner's attempts at getting into the Fleet database had taken longer than anyone anticipated, and sunset had bled into heavy night. Everyone was currently fast asleep. Everyone except Tanner, and now Max.

And presumably Dallas, wherever she had gone.

The bed groaned as Max rolled and stood, plush carpet sinking beneath his feet. Wearing only his boxers, he slid open the pocket door, keeping the lights off as he lumbered down the hallway.

All of Death's Landing was dark and silent, save the clacking of keys drifting from the office, where the soft glow of a computer screen fell through the open doorway.

When he made it to the kitchen, he bumped into Dallas, the glass of water she was holding spilling down the front of her shirt.

*"Watch it,"* she hissed.

*"What are you doing up?"*

She shook her hair out of her face and peered up at him. "I couldn't sleep." That came as no surprise to him; Dallas was having trouble sleeping these days. Her parents pushed her to her limits with her classes and training, so he often woke up in the night when she slept at Hell's Gate to find her downstairs doing homework.

This had gone on long enough.

She was lifting the glass to her mouth when he snatched it out of her hand and set it on the counter.

*"Hey!"* she protested.

He bent and picked her up by the thighs, throwing her over his shoulder, her red hair tumbling down his back.

"Max!" she hissed. "What are you doing?"

"You need to sleep."

"I'll sleep when they knock me out with anesthetics tomorrow." Her surgery to get her wings was looming, and he could tell from the tone of her voice that she was nervous about the procedure. Which was exactly why she needed rest. Proper rest that didn't come from drugs.

He ignored her and started walking, carrying her back to the bedroom. Every step he took sent her hair swishing against his waist.

"Put me down!" Fists thudded against his bare back.

"Shh, you'll wake everyone up." They were back in the room now, and he slid the door shut and threw her onto the mattress.

"What in the gods' names are you doing?" she said again, working to keep her voice down. Those catlike eyes she always kept glamourous were glaring up at him, her anger making her look all the more alluring—and all the more in need of what he was about to offer her.

"Helping you sleep." He threw himself down on the bed beside her, nearly launching her off the mattress with his weight, and pulled her back against him so she was lying with her back pressed against his chest.

Dallas stiffened as she realized he had something other than a sleeping pill in mind to cure her insomnia. "Maximus," she tried, but he could tell from the flutter of her heartbeat and the glow of her aura that her argument was half-hearted. "They'll hear us."

He already had his boxers down, hard cock springing free. "Better be quiet then." He pulled her shirt over her head, chucked it on the floor, and tugged down the pajama shorts she was wearing—the ones she'd borrowed from Hanli. He swiped his fingers between her thighs.

Dallas squirmed, peering over her shoulder at him as he rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

"You want this," he accused.

She wet her lips. "So what if I do?"

"Then you should tell me instead of always playing hard to get." Grabbing her by the thigh, he lifted her up, spreading her open, and slid his dick inside her. Warm, tight heat wrapped around him, making them both groan. "Hold onto the bed."

At least she listened to him that time, her left hand going to the edge of the mattress and gripping it tight. He started thrusting, moving slowly and deeply to start, allowing her body to adjust to the intrusion.

Grabbing her by the chin, he turned her face until they were nearly nose to nose. He wasn't surprised in the least when she still avoided his stare. "Look at me, Dallas."

Silver-green eyes met his in the dark, blinking far more than they

needed to, now that his attention was fully on her face.

"There," he breathed with a deep groan. His hand returned to her thigh, pulling it up as he buried himself inside her, again and again, pushing so deeply that she shivered. "Was that so bad?"

"I don't know why it's so important to you."

"Because you avoid it whenever we do this." His breathing shifted to a ragged pant. "Am I that hard to look at?"

"It's not that, and you know it." Yeah, he did know it, but he didn't understand what the real reason was.

"Then tell me." He slammed into her harder, watching her breasts bounce in the dark.

"Just shut the hell up and kiss me, Maximus."

She didn't need to ask him twice.

Their lips locked with a passionate clashing of teeth, and he dipped his tongue into her mouth, a claiming that had her whimpering, her back curving in the sheets as she pressed her ass back into him.

Heat rushed through his body, his desire for swift release pushing him to move faster. The bed shook beneath him with every thrust, and something fell off the side table.

"Stop!" Dallas gasped. "Max, they're going to hear us—"

"That's what my magic is for," he panted, pounding into her harder, her beautiful ass clapping against his front. The Sight swallowed his vision as he built a wall of invisible magic around the room. He blinked the black away as soon as he could so he could watch her body bowing against his. "Let it out, Dal. Quit holding back on me." She always got off as quickly as possible, never giving him her all.

But he wanted it. He wanted all she had to give, and he wanted to be the only man she would ever give it to, the only man she would fully trust with more than just her body.

Gripping her thigh harder, fingers digging in, he picked up speed, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh carrying through the room, his wall of magic stopping anyone in the penthouse from hearing.

"Oh god," she cried out, pushing into him now. Again and again and again, she met him, blow for blow, her movements as hard and determined as his. "Yes!"

Max swore under his breath as his own climax neared, sweat prickling on his back.

"Don't stop," she begged, turning her head to kiss him.

"Take it, Dal," he breathed against her mouth. She clawed at the back of his neck, holding onto him as she planted taunting kisses on his jaw and lips, biting and sucking. She never kissed him like this, always avoiding intimacy face to face, and this change in their relationship, this gift she was giving him, was enough that he found

he had to hold back, stopping himself from coming inside her right then. A growl climbed up his throat. "Come on, Red." He dipped a hand between her legs so he could rub her clit. She was breathing so rapidly that he could feel her breasts rising against his arm. "I want to feel you come on my cock."

He drove himself into Dallas on the angle that would push her over the finish line, pounding harder and harder—

She came with a high cry, her body jerking against his.

At the feel of her insides squeezing his cock, Max let himself go, shuddering with release as hot cum exploded into her and shot down her thigh. His eyes turned black again from the feeling.

"Fuck." His body shook with pleasure. The convulsions slowed with every uneven thrust, the sound of flesh clapping dying out.

Until he finally stilled, hanging his head against her shoulder.

He blinked the Sight out of his vision and brushed the hair back from Dallas's face. "Think you can sleep now?" he whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple, feeling her rapid pulse under his lips.

"I think," she panted, squirming on his cock. He stilled her with a hand on her hip, the feeling so intense that a chill ran up his spine, causing him to twitch inside her. She concluded in a tone that was breathy and seductive, "That we need to go again."

*Fuck me.* Max's skin electrified at the suggestion, especially as she lifted her head up to kiss the edge of his jaw.

He pulled out of her and sat up, sheets bunching under him. He fully removed his boxers and threw them on the floor.

"Maximus!" she whined.

He jerked his chin at the headboard. "On your knees."

—

"Did you even sleep at all?" Max asked Tanner as he walked into the office the following morning, mug of steaming coffee in hand.

The hacker was in the exact same spot as last night, bloodshot eyes glued to the bright screen of his laptop, fingers frantically clicking the mouse. "Not a wink," Tanner replied. "Bring some coffee, will you?"

"Here." Max walked up to the desk and set down his mug. "I haven't touched this yet. I'll go make more."

One by one, everyone in the house woke up. Jack and Ivy looked like they'd had the same kind of night as Max and Dallas, the hickeys on Ivy's neck confirming Max's suspicions. But no one said anything about it, not even Jack, who probably had his lips sealed shut by his wife before they'd left the bedroom where they'd spent the night.

Dominic was the last to wake up. When he finally drifted into the office and joined the rest of them, cup of coffee in hand, Blue

following on his heels, Max turned to look at him and tipped up a brow.

"About time," Max said. "Isn't the host supposed to be up and at 'em before anyone else?"

"Not when it's an unwilling host," Dominic said, sipping his coffee that smelled of way too much hazelnut creamer. "You guys have practically invaded." His eyes went to the laptop. "Find anything out, Tanner?"

"It was easier to focus when I didn't have a bunch of vultures looming behind me," Tanner murmured. But he clicked a few more keys and hit the space bar with a loud *clack*. "There!"

The symbols on the black screen vanished, and the Fleet database appeared with a flash.

Everyone crowded around the desk, heads nearly pressed together.

"Tell me what I need to look for," Tanner said, sounding proud of himself as he started clicking through pages, "and I will find it."

"Missing Fleet soldiers," Dallas replied, standing so close to Tanner that he could probably feel her breath on his neck.

A couple minutes later, and Tanner found the first one. A hellseher named Delia Williams. She had hair so blonde, it was practically yellow, and her eyes were a gold so vivid, Max wondered if they were contacts.

Blue stepped closer. "Who?" She pointed at the screen with a blue-tinted nail.

"Delia Williams," Tanner murmured. "It says she went missing four weeks ago." He used the mouse to draw a circle around a code at the bottom of the screen, next to the area that listed a person's rank in the Fleet army. "What do you think this means?"

Several heads turned toward Dallas.

Dallas looked entirely lost as she glanced about, unbrushed hair hanging in her face. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

Lace rolled her eyes. "Because you train for the Fleet."

"I know nothing about this!" Dallas said.

Jack snorted. "What's the point in working for them if they don't tell you jack-shit about the army?"

"I'm a trainee!" Dallas fumed. "Why would they tell *me*, a girl who hasn't even got her wings yet, about their frontline soldiers?"

Max offered, "Her parents are fucking useless. Leave her alone."

"Besides," Dallas continued, her sharp voice drowning out whatever Dominic was trying to say, "my dad discusses nothing around me, especially since Kalendae. Honestly, I think, after everything that happened with my mom, he's scared of the imperator."

"With good reason," Tanner murmured, still scrolling with the

mouse, his other hand stroking the shadow of stubble on his chin. "The guy's crazy."

"Are you all forgetting that I used to fight with the Fleet?" Dominic interjected. "Not to mention all the other Angels in this house." He gestured to the screen with his cup, coffee sloshing and nearly spilling on the carpet. "They're called Elementals. They're a Special Task Force for the Fleet, but they're only used in rare cases of emergency because their magic is easily exhaustible. There were less than eight of them in the whole of Terra's Fleets back when I fought for Roark." He sipped on the coffee. "I've never seen this girl before."

"This would be so much easier if her dad would just talk to us," Lace grumbled.

Ivy tucked a strand of her hair behind an ear as she stared at the photograph of the woman. "Why do they call them Elementals?"

Dominic shrugged. "That, I don't know. Elementals were kept out of the public eye as much as possible—again, I don't know why. We never saw them fight, not even once."

Tanner clicked onto the next one. A male hellseher with blonde hair, his eyes a royal blue. Missing for one week, it said.

"What does this mean?" Dallas asked, jabbing a fingertip onto the screen, the contact causing the space around it to ripple. "*M: Blue.*"

Max looked at her, and she looked back. They guessed in unison, their voices melding into one, "Magic?"

Tanner mused, "Blue magic." He repeated the word, again and again, chair swiveling in a complete rotation, his socked feet nearly kicking people in the shins. He kept spinning, fingers drumming his chin. Finally, he stilled the chair with a planting of his feet against the carpet and snapped his fingers. "Has anyone ever read Blue's aura?"

Heads turned as everyone glanced at each other. No one spoke up.

Tanner rolled his eyes. "Almost every person in this room is a hellseher, and no one's checked her aura?"

"Don't be so critical, you're a hellseher too," Max said, but his eyes turned black as he spoke, calling upon his Sight.

Ivy said, "We've never had any incentive to check it." Unless they were tracking targets, or had a reason for wanting to read a person's aura, they tended to avoid it.

Max said to Dominic, "Take off her talisman, please."

Dominic did so without delay, the action causing Blue to startle. She stepped behind Dom, hiding herself with his wing. He urged her forward with that wing, murmuring words of comfort in Ilevyn.

Max focused on her aura, and he saw that every part of it was blazing blue, save the outline that displayed the colors of the emotions she was feeling. Right now, it was anxiety and fear, along with a touch of affection he knew was for the Angel at her side.

Max blinked away the black. "Blue. Like, crazy blue. I've never seen an aura like this before." He'd seen some pretty impressive auras in his lifetime, but nothing with one shade so wholly vibrant like this. In fact, the only aura he'd ever seen that rivalled this one was Loren's, and hers was either solid white or effervescent rainbow, all shades equal.

The other hellsehers in the room were reading it too, the barrage of black eyes that were on Blue causing her to retreat behind Dominic again, hair falling in her face.

Dallas grumbled, "I've never felt so useless in all my life."

Tanner used the mouse to circle the code at the bottom of the screen again. "This—" He clicked the mouse several times for illustration. "I know what this is now. It's a hexadecimal color code."

Jack said, "A hexa-hoobida-whatta?"

"Don't hurt yourself, Jack," Max said.

"A hexadecimal color code," Tanner repeated. He peeked over his shoulder at Jack. "I wouldn't expect your bird brain to understand."

Sabrina mused, "Blue aura magic. Do you think it's similar to how they classify magic in schools?" Everyone's attention fell on her, black fading out of hellseher eyes. She explained, "At AA, all the students are divided into houses: Mercury, Salt, and Brimstone. But it's typically used to evaluate types of magic in witches and warlocks, not hellsehers."

Witches and warlocks had always had the magic in their blood sorted by category from the second they were born. They could have one of only three types of magic: water, earth, or fire.

Tanner clicked on the screen until he had the golden-haired girl displayed again. "*M: Yellow*," he read. He looked up at Max, screen reflecting in his glasses. "What's yellow?"

No one had an answer to that.

Dallas swore.

"What?" Max asked.

She waved a hand at the clock on the upper-righthand corner of the screen. "Look at the time! I have to go. If I miss my surgery, my dad will freaking kill me." She made a beeline for the office door.

"Wait up, Red," Max called. "I'm driving you."

But she was stopped by an Angel suddenly blocking the doorway.

"Knock-knock, fuckers," Conrad boomed as he edged around Dallas and walked into the cramped room.

Jack grinned. "How was your drinking and flying?"

"Hit a few pigeons and got shit on by a seagull, but aside from that, all went well." His eyes found Logan, whose back was still turned to him as he leaned on the desk, reading over Atlas's shoulder. "Darien called. He's looking for Logan."

Logan straightened and turned, pushing the long, dark hair out of his face. "What's going on?"

Conrad blinked. "Have you not checked your phone?"

Logan stared at him blankly, and he wasn't the only one who was doing it.

Conrad lifted his brows. "Have you guys been in a bubble for the past twelve hours or something?"

Dominic said, "Spit it out, instead of making us guess."

"A dead vampire was found in Werewolf Territory last night."

The blood drained from Logan's face. Max smelled the threat of the shift as the wolf's arms began to vibrate, a few of his facial muscles ticking. "Please tell me you're joking."



Max sat in the waiting room of Angelthene General Hospital. He tapped his fingers against his knees, staring up at the clock that hung on the wall near the desk. The clacking of keys, the dull ringing of phones, and the hum of printers spitting out sheets of paper filled the silence.

He didn't know why he was so nervous. The surgery to give a Fleet soldier their wings was simple and quick, and it came with very few risks attached. But he couldn't stop wanting to sprint into the room where they were keeping Dallas and check on her. He'd held her hand for as long as possible, and when they'd wheeled her through a set of doors, she'd watched him the whole time, right up until those doors had swung shut, separating her from him.

After their night together at Death's Landing, and after they'd opened up to each other at the Fleet event, he couldn't help but hope their relationship might finally be taking a turn toward being more than just physical. He wanted more from Dallas—he'd always wanted more—but he'd respected her reluctance to let down her wall, allowing their relationship to move at her pace instead of his. But truth be told, he was going nuts. Every moment with her made his feelings double in intensity, but he was scared as hell that she didn't feel as strongly about him.

The buzzing of his phone in the pocket of his jeans had one of the receptionists giving him the stink eye. He mouthed an apology and got to his feet, making his way through the waiting room that was empty, save a witch and a warlock seated by the vending machine.

Checking the caller identification before he answered, he stepped through the sliding glass doors that squealed open on the track and swiped right to answer the Angel's call.

"Find anything else?" Max said by way of greeting. It was sunny for a change. Golden rays of sunshine streamed from a bright blue sky, warming his hair and jacket. The heat gave the city its signature oaky, desert-ish smell, a weirdly addicting fragrance Max always found himself sucking down as if it were liquor.

Dominic's husky voice drifted through the speaker. "Two more of the missing Fleet soldiers—both disappeared about a week ago. There appears to be four who have been taken so far in total."

"Anything that stands out?"

“A female hellseher with white hair, no pigment in her irises. Says her magic is white.”

“And the other one?”

“Another hellseher,” he said. He murmured to Tanner in the background, “Can you bring up the last one again?” Fingers drummed on a keyboard. And then Dominic said, “Male hellseher with dark hair, green eyes. Says his magic is green.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Max began as he paced next to the doors, boots thumping on pavement. “Aside from aura healing, aura magic has always been pretty unthreatening. Witches and warlocks with fire, water, or earth magic can hardly do much with it, so why would Elementals be such a big deal?” The most a standard warlock or witch could do with those types of magic was spur a ship to sail faster across the sea, or aid firefighters in putting out a burning building. Certainly nothing worth anyone getting their back up about, let alone wanting to kidnap someone and use them for...well, whatever they were doing.

“Sabrine had an idea,” Dominic said. “I’ll let you talk to her.” The phone crackled as Dominic passed her the phone.

And then Sabrine was on the line. “How’s Dallas?”

“She hasn’t woken up yet. How’s Logan?”

“I haven’t heard.” She sighed. “But I’m sure I’ll know soon enough.”

“Dominic said you have a theory.”

“I do,” she began, a touch apprehensively. “The missing people are all hellsehers.” Hellsehers—the only magic users who’d never had their magic sorted into such stark categories like this. “My theory is that the people on this Special Task Force have been modified in some way.”

“Like gene modification?”

“Maybe, yeah. The Fleet has always been super devoted to protecting the people of Terra. I wouldn’t put it past them to have researched magic and looked into what they could do with it if they manipulated someone’s gene pool.”

“I wonder if the subjects were willing.”

Her voice dipped in volume. “We’re still trying to figure out how this is connected to Blue.” It sounded like she was stepping into another room. “We know she was brought to Angelthene by people who thought she was important enough to keep a tracking device in her arm. She must have some kind of rare magic, or something that’s important to them.”

“Has Dominic tried asking her about her magic?”

“She seems pretty spooked by all of this. Tanner is looking into it more. He’s trying to see if he can find anyone else who’s gone

missing.”

“No bodies have turned up?”

“Not from what we’ve heard.”

“Were you able to see if Blue is one of those Elemental people? Was she part of the Fleet?”

“We can’t find anything on her.” Not to mention that when they’d found her standing in the road, she’d had no identification on her.

The glass doors slid open, and Doctor Atlas stepped out, pausing when she saw that he was on the phone.

Max’s palms prickled with sweat. “Sab, I gotta go.”

“Let me know how Dallas is when you see her. I’ll head down once she’s awake, and I’ll see if Loren wants to come.”

“Got it.” He hung up, heart picking up to a sprint.

Doctor Atlas smiled. “Surgery went well. She’s awake.”

---

An hour after school was out, Loren found Dallas eating her weight in ice cream in her room at Angelthene General Hospital. She was lying on her stomach on the bed, feet on her pillow, white feathered wings held aloft by suspension cords that were fastened into the ceiling.

At the sight of Loren and Sabrina rushing into the room, a cloud of red balloons squeaking as they rubbed against each other on their way through the doorframe, Dallas squealed. Maximus had been nodding off in the patterned chair beside the bed, but he jolted awake at the commotion as if a bomb went off.

“Took you two biatches long enough!” Dallas laughed, tossing aside the tub of ice cream. The action sent her spoon clattering to the floor.

“You wouldn’t believe how hard it was to find these balloons,” Loren told Dallas as she plopped herself down on the side of the bed. She held a balloon still so Dallas could get a proper look.

Dallas tipped back her head and cackled. “*Best Witches*,” she read aloud. Loren knew how Dallas loved her puns.

Sabrina took a seat at Dallas’s other side and set a pink box that smelled of icing and cake batter by her elbow. “We also stopped at Whisking Witch and got you some of your favorites.” She lifted the lid, where a dozen cupcakes sat on a layer of tissue, the marshmallow frosting shaped like ghosts, their googly eyes made of candies.

Dallas went to grab one, but winced in pain.

Maximus sat up, face lining with stress as he picked up on her near-inaudible intake of air. “Take it easy, Dal.”

She plucked a cupcake from the box. “Yeah, yeah.” She waved him away, although in truth Loren knew Dallas loved how attentive he was

being. Maximus Reacher, killer extraordinaire, was nothing but a big softy for her. “I need my sugar fill.” The cupcake was gone in two bites, which was impressive considering it was bigger than her fist, and then she was licking her fingers clean.

Regardless of how happy Dallas clearly was with the company of her friends—not to mention the eye candy in the form of a looming, heavily muscled bounty hunter seated beside her bed—Loren caught her glancing at her cell phone, the device resting near her elbow.

But the screen didn’t light up, nor did the speaker make a sound. Loren knew she was waiting for her mother; a call or a text, anything that might indicate that Taega cared about her daughter’s surgery. What Loren knew hurt worse, however, was knowing her father didn’t care either, not even now that he was back in town.

Maximus didn’t appear to be unaware of this either. He was watching her closely, a look of concern on his face that he expertly hid when Dallas glanced his way.

Dallas forced a smile. “Any more news?” she asked him.

His expression became guarded.

Loren glanced between them. “News about what?”

Dallas slapped Loren’s thigh. “If you’d been around last night instead of working on your stupid project, you would know already.”

Sabrina said, “Leave her alone. It’s good that she’s concentrating on her studies.” If only they knew what she was really doing. If only she could tell them.

“Is anyone going to spit it out?” Loren asked.

It was Maximus who answered. “We went to Death’s Landing to see what Dominic learned about Blue.”

“And?”

He got up so he could shut the door. “We think she has some type of rare magic,” he began, leaning back against the wall by the door. Loren sat up straight. “Her aura is blue—”

Dallas snorted. “Big surprise.”

“—and Tanner got into the Fleet database and found four missing soldiers called Elementals.”

“What are those?” Loren asked.

Dallas replied, “We don’t know all the details, but Dominic said they’re a Special Task Force for the Aerial Fleet, and it looks like their magic is categorized by color.”

Sabrina chimed in. “The core colors of their auras.”

Loren’s mind went to the emperor and Spirit Terra. Could the missing Fleet soldiers be connected in some way to what he was doing in Spirit Terra? It was all the more reason to figure out how to access her magic and find answers.

Which was exactly her plan—and exactly the reason why she’d

made the decision to come to Angelthene General today. Well, aside from Dal's surgery. There were people here who might be able to help her—Aura Healers who made a living by using their white and multicolored auras to help people who suffered from Surges and the Tricking.

She would just have to find Tanner's mother first.

---

Loren spotted Doctor Atlas on the second floor of Angelthene General Hospital. She was walking in the opposite direction, clipboard in hand, white lab coat billowing behind her. Loren hurried to catch up with her without breaking into a run.

She reached Doctor Atlas just as she was pressing the button for the elevator. "Doctor Atlas," she panted.

Tanner's mother turned, smiling when she recognized her. "Hi, Loren. What brings you here? Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine, I'm just a little out of breath. I was trying to catch up with you. I'm here with Dallas. She's still recovering from her surgery."

"How's she doing?"

"Good, good. They said she can go home tonight."

Doctor Atlas gave her a patient smile. "I know. I'm one of the doctors who's been tending to her today."

The elevator dinged, the doors sliding open. Humans, veneficae, and werewolves shuffled out, leaving room for Doctor Atlas to get inside.

Loren stepped forward before Doctor Atlas could move. "Hey, do you know anything about the Aura Healers here?"

"What about them?"

"I'm just wondering if any of them offer lessons."

Doctor Atlas crossed her arms and drummed her clipboard against her hip. "Loren, what's this for?"

"Just a school project," she said quickly. "I'm supposed to get some hands-on experience with aura healing."

"Look, Loren. I'm not trying to sound rude when I say this, but they've got a job to do. Did AA tell you to come to the hospital?"

"No, I just...thought you might be able to help me."

"You're going to have to look somewhere else, honey. I'm sorry, but none of them have the time." The elevator doors began to shut, but she stopped them halfway with a hand. She walked inside and pressed a couple buttons.

"Nice to see you," Loren said, trying her best to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

The doors began to slide shut again.

Just as Loren was turning around to head back to Dallas's room, Doctor Atlas stopped the doors from closing.

"Loren," she called softly. Loren turned back around. "See if you can get in to see Agatha."

"Who's Agatha? Does she work here?"

"She's the owner of Agatha's Post Secondary Education for Botany. She knows a lot about aura healing, because she used to be a Healer herself. She might be able to help you."

Loren's heart quickened with hope. "What should I tell her?"

Doctor Atlas shrugged, stepping back inside the elevator. "Tell her your boyfriend sent you." A smile that resembled her son's played on her mouth, so subtle Loren wasn't sure if she was imagining it.

The doors slid shut. The red numbers above the elevator flashed as Doctor Atlas made her way to one of the highest floors in the building.

Loren stood there, trying to make sense of what Doctor Atlas's last comment could mean.

But then she remembered the school Darien had recommended she look into if she ever found herself disappointed by the classes Angelthene Academy had to offer. Agatha might be her only shot at learning how to use her magic, but...the hedgewitch knew Darien somehow. Might even still talk to him, for all she knew. But she had to try. She would just have to make sure Darien never found out what she was doing.

At least not until she herself knew what she was doing. Her plan remained the same: she might not be able to tell him what was going on, but if she found out how to show him, it would be her best chance at handing him the truth without costing him his life.

—

Agatha's Post Secondary Education for Botany was the cutest school Loren had ever seen.

Standing on the path out front of the old building, she took in every detail, mesmerized by the winged statues, the creeping ivy covering nearly every inch of the brick walls, the arched double doors that were so tall she had to tip her head all way back to see where they peaked at the seam. A fountain babbled at the side of the building, and birds chirped in the old oak trees that draped their heavy canopies across the stone path. That path was short and meandering, and it led to front steps that were covered in chalk art of bumble bees, flowers, and potions.

"Here goes nothing," she breathed.

Loren squared her shoulders and walked up the steps, being careful

not to scuff the cute chalk art. She passed by a wooden sign that read *Welcome to Agatha's Post Secondary Education for Botany, EST. 6873*. She could already smell all the flowers inside as she pushed open the substantial doors. They shuddered as they swung inward with a low groan, and a gust of sultry air wrapped around her.

The inside was even more breathtaking than the outside. The entrance hall was all vaulted ceilings and windows that were stained with images of tiny winged people tending to flower gardens and vegetable crops. There was a massive curved desk in the centre of the hall, where two witches sat among crooked towers of grimoires. Quills scratched on pads of paper, enchanted to move on their own. Two owl Familiars perched on wooden posts, watching her with wide, unblinking eyes.

Loren felt like a kid in a candy store as she walked up to the desk. Her eyes were bugging out of her head, and her mouth was hanging open, her tongue already dried out.

The eldest witch looked up from her grimoire. "Can I help you?"

Loren collected herself and cleared her throat, the low sound carrying far. "I'm here to see Agatha."

"Are you her new errand girl?"

Errand girl? "No, I am...a new student."

The witch pinched the arm of her glasses and slid them down her hooked nose. She peered at Loren like she was a new insect she'd never seen before, her furry brows pulling so closely together that they became one. "I hope I don't sound rude when I say this, dear, but you... Well, you..." She cleared her throat and smoothed her shirt, the fabric a colorful pattern with turnips and watering cans. "You are human, dear."

Loren tried not to roll her eyes. "I'm aware of that, thanks."

"Is Agatha expecting you?"

"No. I actually work for Mordred and Penelope. They suggested I talk to Agatha about taking classes here." The lie came so smoothly, she almost believed it herself.

The witch's chair groaned as she heaved herself to her feet. "Come with me. Agatha still has another fifteen minutes left of her class before she can see you, so let's find you someplace more comfortable to wait."

—

Loren paced by the tanks and terrariums in the stuffy room, trying to think of what to say to Agatha when she got here. She breathed deeply, the different fragrances from all the blooms—some of them honeylike, others herbal or musky—filling her lungs and making her

nose twitch.

Time was passing at a turtle's pace. Or maybe it only felt that way because of how eager she was to get this conversation over and done with. She'd paced the same few feet of floor so many times she wondered how it was possible that she hadn't dug a hole in it.

The enormous door groaned open, and she stilled.

A witch with a mass of curly brown hair that fell past her hips stepped into the room. She was beautiful, her tan skin dusted with countless freckles, her full figure voluptuous in a way that surely drew attention everywhere she went. Big eyes that were like emeralds slid over Loren with critical and thorough assessment before humor pulled her lips up into a tiny smile.

"Rickie wasn't kidding," she said. "You *are* human."

"My name is Loren Calla. This might be an odd request, but I'm hoping you can help me."

She shut the door and crossed the room, the dress that matched her eyes swishing across the floor. "Rickie told me you'd like to discuss the possibility of taking classes here."

"I was thinking more along the lines of after school sessions. One on one time, just the two of us."

"And what would you like me to teach you?"

"Magic."

Agatha raised a perfectly shaped brow.

"Aura healing, to be specific." It was the safest thing to say. A lot safer than telling Agatha that she wanted to learn how to open another door into Spirit Terra, how to freeze people where they stood, how to project her aura outside of her body ...

And how to kill her enemies with it.

Agatha's lips inched upward at the corners. "And what would you do during these lessons? Take notes while I talk and demonstrate?"

Loren suppressed the irritation she felt from Agatha's condescending tone. "I'm currently attending Angelthene Academy, but they lack in my field of interest. And no, I would not just be taking notes. I would also be using my magic." Loren knew the simple fact that she was a student at Angelthene Academy would make Agatha even more unwilling to believe her. As the top post-secondary education institution in the city—a school that taught mainly magic—humans were rarely ever accepted as students, since it held very little appeal to most of her demographic. If it weren't for Roark and Taega's influence, Loren never would've received an acceptance letter, but she'd wanted so badly to attend AA that she didn't take no for an answer. It was the best education she could receive, and her best chance at getting into the field of herbal magic.

Agatha stared at her with a stony face for nearly a full minute.



Slowly, her mouth stretched into a smile, and a short cackle bubbled up her throat. “Rickie put you up to this, didn’t she?”

Loren lifted her chin, teeth grinding audibly. “I didn’t come here to be mocked. I *do* have magic, and just because you’ve never seen a human with powers before doesn’t mean we don’t exist. We deserve to be treated the same as anyone else.”

“You’re serious?” Agatha was still looking far too amused. “That’s cute. Look, Lauren, I am a very busy person. I simply don’t have the time to take on extra lessons after school. I’m tired by the end of my days and would like to go home.” She began to walk away, hips swaying.

“What if I told you Darien Cassel referred me?” She didn’t want to play this card, but if this was what needed to happen for her to be taken seriously, then she didn’t have much of a choice.

Agatha’s dress swooshed like water over smooth stone as she turned back around to face her. “Now I don’t know which is the more far-fetched story.”

Loren ignored the snide comment. “I’m dating him, and he recommended that I come talk to you. I bet he wasn’t expecting you to be so rude.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have proof of your magic, would you? It’s slightly more likely than your other high tale.”

Nostrils flared, blood thrumming with anger, Loren pulled her phone out of her purse. “No one sees my magic until I’ve established that I can trust them.” She unlocked her phone with her thumb print and pulled up her photo album, her nail clinking on the screen as she scrolled up, rows of photos speeding by. Every photo that had Darien in it made her heart ache. “But since you don’t seem to trust me either...” She enlarged a recent photo of her sitting in Darien’s lap at the Forbidden Beach, a peaceful and secluded area he’d taken her to on a clear night shortly after Kalendae.

Thoughts of that night made her throbbing heart threaten to split in two, the memory briefly transporting her back in time. She remembered every vivid detail—how his strong body had kept her warm against the night as he hovered over her, one of his hands pinning both of her wrists above her head while the other gripped her waist; the texture of the blanket under her back as the sand shifted under it with every hard thrust; how the stars had dusted the sky behind his head, wreathing him in tiny diamonds; how he’d kept his chest so close to hers that she could feel the chains he wore around his neck whispering across her skin.

Blinking away the memory, she turned the phone around so Agatha could see the screen—could see that Darien’s arms were wrapped around her possessively, his intense stare locked on the screen as he

kissed her on the cheek. "Is this proof enough for you?" she gritted out. "Or would you like to see more?"

The way Agatha blinked, as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing, told Loren that she'd got her point across. And photographs did not lie. "I don't...I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll teach me. Say you'll teach me, and that you've learned your lesson about mocking others."

"I'm truly sorry," she spluttered.

Loren put her phone away. "Sometimes I get really tired of it," she said quietly, but not weakly. "Of people treating me like I am less than them. I didn't ask to be human, you know."

Agatha had nothing to say.

Loren concluded, "I will accept your apology and your lessons, if you are willing to work with me."

"I am more than willing."

"I have one more stipulation to make." The hedgewitch waited, apprehension in her stare. "Darien is never to hear about this."

Her brows shot up. "That, I can't agree—"

"Yes, you can, and you will," Loren said, her words just shy of a shout. "He is worried about me using my magic, but it's not his decision to make, it's mine. Wouldn't you agree?" She had to make sure she was ready before she showed him the truth, and no slipup from a stranger like Agatha was going to wreck that for her. There was no room for error here, not when his life was on the line.

Another rapid blinking of green eyes, and then Agatha was nodding.

"Great," Loren said. "When do we begin?"

“You did good,” Gaven said.

Darien was standing in the same room in the Devil’s Advocate as the last time he’d met with Gaven. This place was really beginning to get under his skin, tempting him to light the whole damn thing on fire just so he wouldn’t have to look at it anymore.

The route Gaven had given him—the same route Darien had shared with Finn—had gone smoothly. Sylvan and Valen had seen the whole thing through to the end, right to when the crates of Blood Staves had been delivered to a group of men driving a windowless black van that had no license plates. They’d managed to get a few photographs for Darien to pass along to Finn, but it would take more than one route to figure out where Gaven kept his supplies.

Hopefully it would be this next route—whatever route Gaven was planning on giving him tonight. Enough pissing around—Darien wanted this over and done with. *Properly*.

Darien said, “Good enough to make you want to leave me the fuck alone now?”

The prick smirked up at him from where he sat at the table. “I have a special run I’d like you to make for me.”

“I don’t run, I arrange for others to do it for me. That was our deal.”

“And I’m making one slight modification to that deal,” Gaven said, lacing his gloved fingers on the table, the emerald ring he always wore bulging through the leather. “You are to make this run for me, Darien. Just this one.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“It’s a delivery for a very important client. You are to meet with a man who goes by Al at the Iron Dock at sunset tomorrow. Take what he gives you to the old Casa Brewery on Deep Run immediately.” He slid a sealed envelope across the table and gave him an ugly smirk. “For your troubles.”

Darien snatched the envelope up and walked away.

“Oh, and Darien?” Gaven called.

Darien half-turned in his direction, knuckles itching with the need to break bones.

Gaven’s smile grew. “It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

---

When he was back in his car, Darien slammed the door shut and pushed his hair back hard enough to make him tear up, rings catching in hair gel, anger blowing up inside him like a balloon.

"I hate that prick!" he fumed, striking the steering wheel with a fist. It vibrated from the impact, the keys he'd left in the ignition clinking, the succulent keychain Loren had made for him eyeing him with accusation.

He'd almost forgot Malakai was in the car when he spoke. "You sure you don't want to just kill him and his dickheads right now instead of doing all this legwork?"

"Tempting, but no." He started the car and turned on the headlights, bright beams illuminating a group of vampires and witches making their way to the club doors, all of them dressed to the nines. "I made a deal, and I'm not about to back out on it."

"What does this Finn guy mean to you, anyway?"

Darien pulled out onto the road, the swift acceleration attempting to yank him back against the seat. "He's been an acquaintance for a few years. A sort-of friend who bailed me out of trouble a few times during my partying years." He cracked open his window, a balmy breeze that smelled of creosote and asphalt floating in. "But it's not about that. It's about protecting my family and my home. I won't cut any corners and risk Gaven's men retaliating."

"And what about these connections I keep hearing he has outside of Angelthene? We can't possibly take them all down, there's no way."

"Maybe not. But if you render their entire operation useless and too risky to start up again, I'm banking on the stragglers that are left behind not having the guts to try anything with us. Besides, you're talking like Gaven's going to find out what we're doing." He pinned Malakai with a look. "And I have no intention of being caught. You still with me?"

Malakai's silver canines glinted with a smile. "What's the plan?"

"The Iron Dock at sunset tomorrow. We're delivering a special shipment for Gaven to Casa Brewery."

"Us?"

"Yes."

"Did he say what it was?"

"Course not." He gave Malakai an evil grin. "But I'm planning on finding out."

Malakai pumped a fist in the air. "Hell yeah!"

"Told you this would be worth your time."

After Darien dropped Malakai off at the House of Souls, and the Reaper disappeared through the gates with his signature middle finger thrown over a shoulder, he stayed parked on the side of the road

beneath the shelter of a jacaranda tree and called Finn.

As he waited for the detective to pick up, he found his head turning toward the cemetery across the street.

One blink brought him back in time, and he lost himself to the same awful memory he'd seen not too long ago, the one he couldn't bring himself to discuss with Loren when she'd asked him about it. He saw it so vividly, it was as if it had happened only yesterday, and his stomach twisted with the same horror and loathing as it had back then.

*Where Darien was sitting on the end of his bed, Bandit curled up at his side, he turned up the music to the highest volume. It blared through his earbuds, so loud it felt like his brain was bleeding.*

*He welcomed the pain. The noise. Anything to stop him from hearing what was going on in his parents' bedroom. The noise drifting from that room wasn't something you'd hear from a happy couple. Randal Slade and Elsie Cassel weren't happy. They hadn't been happy for a while now.*

*Darien couldn't take the sound of fists striking his mother, of boots kicking her in the ribs and hips, long after she'd already crashed to the floor. Long after she'd already had enough. She was begging Randal to stop, but the only person who decided when Randal stopped was Randal.*

*With the music blaring through his earbuds, Darien didn't hear when his bedroom door opened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ivyana step into the room. In her arms, she held Soot, whose ears were lying flat.*

*Darien lifted his head. Yanked one earbud out.*

*"He's going to kill her." Ivy's whispered words were barely audible, her steel-blue eyes shining with tears. She hoisted Soot up higher, the dog's long, misty limbs dangling past Ivy's hips. Like Bandit, her Familiar was getting too big for her to carry.*

*Darien pulled the other earbud out and threw his phone on the bed. If Ivy had to listen to this shit, then he would listen to it too.*

*He patted the bed. Ivy crossed the room and sat down beside him.*

*Darien wrapped an arm around his sister's shoulders. "He won't kill her," he said. "I promise." But even he could hear the uncertainty in his words. This kind of behavior had been going on in the household for a while now. He and Ivy had turned fourteen two weeks ago; less than four years from now, they would finally turn eighteen. He was holding onto the hope that when that day came, they would be able to get out of here and away from their father. His mother would come too, of course. They didn't speak of this dream often, but on one of her weakest nights, Elsie had vented to Darien about her plan.*

*'Another few years and we can get away from here, Darien,' she'd told him. 'Life will be better one day. I promise.' As much as he knew she was saying the words for him, he also knew they were partially voiced for her*

own benefit. A promise that one day she wouldn't feel pain anymore.

The next morning, when Darien woke up to get ready for school, he found his mother sitting at the kitchen table. She was covered in bruises, one of her eyes swollen almost completely shut, her lip crusted with blood. She was nursing a cup of tea in her hands, fingers trembling as much as the fake smile she put on as she saw Darien walking into the room.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked him. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

Darien's breaths were coming hard, his hands clenched so tightly that it felt like his knuckles would split through the skin. "He can't keep getting away with this, Mom."

"Darien, it's okay—"

"It's not okay!" His voice broke. He waved a hand at her. "Look at you! You're nothing but his goddamn punching bag."

"Another few years—"

"Another few years and you could be dead."

She ducked her head, throat bobbing.

Darien's vision blurred with tears. "I hate him," he said through clenched teeth. "I hate him, Mom. He can't do this to you—"

Boots pounded outside the front door. Keys jingled.

His mom lurched to her feet and came around the table, taking both of his hands into her own. "Promise me you won't say anything to him."

"Mom—"

"Promise me."

Darien tried to swallow, but he was choking. "I promise," he said. For her, he wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't be the reason that prick put his filthy hands on her again.

"Darien, please," she whispered as the lock clicked open.

"Mom, I promise. I promise."

Darien blinked away the memory. His reality returned, the trees of ACC swaying in a breeze. He didn't look at the farthest corner of the cemetery. Maybe that made him a coward, but he couldn't do it.

The ringing of the phone he was still holding to his ear pushed the last of the memory out of his mind. The call was about to go to voicemail when Finn finally picked up, muffled voices and the patter of isolated showers drifting through the speaker.

Darien looked up at the sky, peering through the tangle of jacaranda branches, most of the petals torn off by wind. He didn't see any threat of another rainstorm, though the weather had been so unpredictable lately that he wouldn't be surprised if one randomly blew in at any second.

"Solace," Finn said.

"I've got some photographs for you to look into." A quick run-through of criminal files should help Finn narrow down who the men

were and add their names to his ever-growing list of people to arrest.

But the detective said, "This isn't really a good time." It sounded like he was walking. Walking somewhere wet, judging from his squelching footsteps.

Darien rolled his eyes. "You asked for my help, man."

"I know, I know. I've just got my hands full at the minute."

"More dead animals?"

"A person, actually." A sigh rattled the phone. "Three of them."

Immediately, the faces of everyone Darien cared about flashed through his mind. "Anyone we know?"

Howling wind and the squish of mud underfoot filled the silence before Finn spoke. "We can't find their identifications, and the faces are...unrecognizable. The car's a rental."

Darien started the engine. "Where are you?"

"The District of Drakon. Down on Foxheart."

"By the lake?"

"That's where we found the bodies."

—

The Magical Protections Unit had pulled the rental car out of the lake with some difficulty. When the team had finally managed to tow it out, it had nearly crumbled into pieces. The front end was totally crushed, tires hanging in shreds off the rims. Every window was shattered, seats torn. The license plates were warped, the letters and numbers illegible.

The bodies were even worse. The limbs and faces were bloated, the flesh spotted with bruises and lacerations. Darien had seen more corpses than the average person, but the sight of these three men was enough to put him on edge.

Where he was standing with Finn a short distance from the crime scene, Darien said, "Any ideas?"

"I'm drawing a blank as to cause and motivation, but we do have a lead." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a photograph. "I'm assuming you've heard of this person?"

Electric-blue eyes stared through the screen, the same shade as the hair that fell in a blunt cut, the ends dusting her shoulders.

Darien said, "You think this girl is responsible for three dead men and a banged up vehicle?"

"From what little we know, it sounds like she was traveling to the city with them. We don't know who they were, who she is, or what they planned on doing once they got to town, but finding her is the most logical step we can take from here."

Darien wasn't writing off the idea that Blue could've done this, but

he couldn't erase the feeling that she wasn't in the wrong, no matter how horrific this looked. While a girl on the run made it look like foul play was involved, it might've been self-defense on her part.

Someone had put a tracking device in her arm. They'd wanted a better chance of finding her if she managed to get away, one that would serve as backup when—or if—the Sight failed them. He wasn't about to turn her in, not until they had her side of the story in full.

"Any registration or insurance papers in the car?" Darien asked.

Finn frowned. "Nothing."

"How'd you know it's a rental?"

"The sticker on the bumper." His attention went to the dark road, where a couple cars were pulling over beside the sign marking Foxheart Street. "Ah, shit. More meddling leeches—just what we need."

"Not a fan of vampires?"

"Not when they interrupt my work. That reminds me...did you hear about Calanthe?"

"What about her?"

"She's dead."

Darien's surprise wasn't faked. Loren had told him she'd seen Calanthe the day the limousine had pulled up in front of her school. For her to have turned up dead, and so suddenly...

"Her death was ruled as murder," Finn said. "We've been trying to talk to Emilie, but she refuses to speak. Hence the vampires all up in our business. They want answers, and I have to admit, three dead bodies on their territory is cause enough for them to come sniffing around. Doesn't make me any more accepting of their presence though." He grimaced.

"How'd Calanthe die?"

"The autopsy revealed that she was ripped to shreds."

"Just like—"

"The other vampire, yeah. And now, all of the sudden Emilie's half-brother is back in town. Coincidence?"

"I'm starting to believe there's no such thing."

—

As soon as Darien was back in his car, Finn no longer around to listen in on what he was about to say, he found Maximus in his list of contacts and hit CALL. He had the volume up as high as it could go, the device vibrating with every ring.

"Pick up," Darien muttered. But he wouldn't be surprised if Max chose not to. With Dallas still recovering from surgery, Max would be giving the witch his undivided attention. Darien wouldn't blame his



friend for it; if it were Loren in Dallas's place, Darien would've done the very same thing. Probably would've went so far as to shut off his phone.

Darien was about to hang up when Max answered. "Hey, Dare."

"Hey," he said, relief coating the greeting. "How's Dallas?"

"She's doing great. Adding some juicy weight to her thighs with some ice cream." The clatter of what sounded like a spoon being thrown at Max's head filled the background. Max was laughing as he said, "What? It's a compliment! I love your juicy thighs."

Dallas's voice was faded by distance, but Darien still heard her mumble, "I'll pop your head off with these juicy thighs."

Darien chuckled. "You got a second?"

"I do, now that I've pissed off the witch."

"Three hellsehers were found dead on Foxheart."

Max swore. "Really?"

Dallas shouted in the background, "What is it? I want to know!"

"Yes, really," Darien said. "And Finn just told me Calanthe was murdered too. Ripped apart, just like—"

"The vampire in Silverwood."

"Right."

"What about these hellsehers?" Max asked. It sounded like he was walking away from Dallas, her curious shouting growing fainter with every word. "What'd it look like to you?"

"They were pulled out of the lake. Their vehicle was fully submerged. Looks like they drowned."

"Shit."

"I want you to be careful around Blue until we find out more about her," Darien said. "The law believes she's attached to these murders. Finn said the men were traveling to Angelthene with her in a rental car." Not to mention how someone had put a warrant out for her arrest before these three dead men had been found, which meant there was more than one reason why the law enforcement wanted to find her.

"Those are the guys who abducted her, no doubt about that." The tone of Max's voice suggested he'd learned something new in his time away from Darien.

"You sound like you have information for me," Darien pressed.

"Blue didn't come to Angelthene alone—and I'm not talking about the dead guys. There was another girl with them; she was picked up on their way here. Blue said two of the men disappeared with the other girl one day and left Blue in a motel. When they came back, they didn't have the girl anymore. Blue assumed the worst, so she found a way to escape."

"Anything else?"

“When I was at the Fleet event with Dallas, we overheard Roark talking about missing Fleet soldiers. We had Tanner get into their database, and he found the four soldiers who’ve gone missing. They’re part of a Special Task Force called Elementals.”

“What are Elementals?”

“We’re still trying to figure that out, but in the Fleet records, their magic is sorted into categories.” Darien was about to ask him to explain when Max said, “They’re sorted by color. We’re assuming it’s aura magic.”

“Let me guess,” Darien began. “Blue’s aura is—”

“Blue,” Max confirmed, speaking it at the same time as Darien. “You got it, boss.”

“I still want you to be careful. If she has anything to do with these Elementals, we don’t know what she’s capable of.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Max paused. “How’s it going with Delaney and the whole...well, you know.”

Darien sighed. “As well as it can. I’ve got something happening tomorrow night.”

“You need help?”

“Delaney’s coming.”

“Let me know if you need me for anything, ’kay? And be careful.”

“Always am. Where are you, anyway?”

“The doctors let Dallas leave, so we’re back at Death’s Landing.”

Darien knew he shouldn’t ask, but the words were out before he could stop them. “Did you see Loren?”

Max hesitated. And then he admitted, “Yeah, she was at the hospital.”

Shit, he should’ve gone. But that was the very same reason he’d made the decision not to. Because he was trying to give her space, but it was harder than he’d ever imagined it would be, even with all this garbage with Gaven keeping him busy. “Did she seem okay?”

Another pause. “She seemed fine.”

Darien wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Was the distance ripping Loren apart the same way it was him? If she was as fine as Max was making it sound, then... Then he didn’t know what to think.

How had everything changed so quickly? It felt like someone had pulled a rug out from under him, only for him to realize there had never been a floor there to begin with.

“Nothing out of the ordinary?” Darien pressed.

“What are you really trying to ask me?”

“She’s safe?”

“Yeah,” Max said. “She seemed fine. Dallas said she’s been making it to every class.”

“Okay,” Darien managed to say. “Tell Dal and Sab to be available

for her, alright? If she ever seems like she isn't doing well, or if something's wrong, I need them to tell me."

"Sure thing."

"Is Tanner there?"

"Hold on." Max grunted. Standing up, by the sound of it.

A minute later, the line crackled as Max passed Atlas the phone.

"Hey," Tanner said.

"Did you find anything on Nolan?" So much had been going on lately that he'd nearly forgotten about his request to have Tanner look into Angelthene's new Head Detective.

"A whole host of documents, photographs and all," Atlas replied. "I can even tell you when to celebrate his birthday, if you'd like to buy him a cake. The guy's married with a couple of kids."

Darien's muscles melted with the news. "Alright. Thanks for looking into it." At least now he knew Finn wasn't messing with him. Tanner was the best at his job. If anything managed to trick him, it would be a first.

"Not a problem," Tanner said.

The phone beeped, indicating a new call was coming through. Darien checked the screen to see an unknown number sliding across it.

"I have another call coming in," he told Tanner. "Can you put Max back on and tell him to hold on a sec? I might need him for something."

"Sure thing."

He paused the call and hit ANSWER. "Cassel."

"Be at the Doghouse at ten p.m.," came Channary's lilting voice. "We need to have a chat."

The Doghouse Strip Club was as raunchy as it sounded.

Rows of chairs and tables surrounded a long stage that stretched from one side of the building to the other, the glossy floor alit with swampy green lights. The air was oiled with Boneweed smoke, sweat-soaked bodies, cheaply cooked Blood Potions, and sex. Lots of sex. The stink of the potions was barely diluted by the alcohol the takers mixed them with, a salty and pungent odor that reminded Darien of moldy towels. A few people in the club shot up right in plain sight, not bothering to conceal their drug-use by blending them into drinks. Most of those people were the same ones who fucked strangers in the booths lining the room, everything on full display for others to watch.

But as filthy as its employees and patrons may be, the Doghouse was one of the best places to go in the city if you were horny and looking for a quick fuck, or bored and broke and sniffing out cheap drugs.

The club was located below ground on Dirge Avenue. Tunnels linked the business to the other strip clubs, bars, and erotic massage parlors on the block, forming a subterranean network of sin that catered to a vast and diverse clientele.

Darien had been here a few times in his life, most of those times now nothing but bleary memories soaked in drugs and alcohol. The only reason he and Maximus were here tonight, seated at one of the tables in the front row, was to meet with Channary. Channary, who was—

“Late,” Max said, checking his watch as he set down his third empty glass of beer. “She’s late.”

“Would you relax and enjoy the show?” Darien said, sipping his own beer—lukewarm and watered down. Not surprising, considering the shithole they were in. “I’m sure she’ll be here any minute.”

Max eyed him. “Why are you telling me to watch the show when *you’re* not even watching?”

“Because I didn’t come here to ogle some stripper’s tits. Those days are behind me.”

The corners of Max’s mouth tipped up. “Think you’ll be on one knee any time soon?”

Darien smirked. “I’m not husband material.” He threw back the last of his beer, that word he’d uttered curdling on his tongue like sour milk.

No, he wasn't husband material. Shit, he was barely even *boyfriend* material. But the gods knew Loren deserved to have a ring on her finger.

Days had passed since he'd seen her, days since he'd heard her sweet voice. The distance was eating at him, chewing through his chest and into his heart, but he buried it carefully. Buried it under flimsy excuses, telling himself that he would see her again soon, and that this, like anything in life, would pass.

He hoped he was right. Besides, it was better that she wasn't around while he dealt with the mess his father had left behind. What a glorious inheritance indeed.

Max studied him with the kind of concern and scrutiny that only a best friend could have. "She talking to you yet?"

"No."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No."

Max sighed through his nose. "I'm here if you change your mind."

Darien watched the stage, looking but not seeing. "I know." He paused. "How's it going with you and Red?"

Now, it was Max's turn to sit in uncomfortable silence. "About the same," he muttered. "Whenever I try to get in deeper with her, she distracts me with sex."

Darien smirked. "That's a bad thing?"

Humor put a slight quirk in his mouth. "It wouldn't be if it were anyone else." His shoulders rose with a deep breath, and then fell with another long sigh blown out through his nose. "But I want more. I've always wanted more from her."

"I hear you."

Max's attention strayed to the far corner of the club. His eyes widened, and he tipped his head back with a groan. "*Seriously?*"

Darien followed his line of sight.

A female, her physique willowy, was heading this way. Her black hair was poker-straight, the ends dipped in cherry-red. Silver-blue eyes were stark against milk-white skin, her slender but strong form nearly swallowed up by a fur coat that fell to her knees. The coat was the heaviest piece of clothing on her body; beneath was fishnets, a short leather skirt, and a top that flaunted her pierced and inked midriff.

"That Lumen?" Darien asked, setting his glass on the table. The hair color was new, and with the screen of smoke masking the room he nearly didn't recognize her. But his question was answered when he spotted Umbrielle, another of Channary's daughters, watching near the tunnel that led to Tantalize. Umbrielle's fox Familiar was curled up on her shoulders, bushy tail draped around her neck, the color

nearly blending in with the thickest head of jet-black hair Darien had ever seen.

"I should duck out," Max mumbled, pushing up out of his seat.

Darien gripped him by the shoulder of his brown leather jacket and yanked him back down. "No, you're staying right here. Besides, she probably doesn't even remember."

"Easy for you to say when you've never crushed a girl under your half-naked body before."

Darien smothered his amusement, managing to compose his expression right on time as Lumen glided to a stop beside their table.

"Darien," she said, dipping her chin. "Maximus." She eyed the latter with contempt, the set of her mouth causing her lip ring to catch the lights rippling through the club. "Careful to keep your distance, please. I don't feel like getting crushed tonight."

Maximus bristled, hands squeezing his knees. "I was drunk—"

"And thoroughly ruined the mood. You would've been a good ride, but alas." Tossing her hair over a shoulder, she measured Darien from head to toe, the dusting of black shadow on her lids sparkling like crushed onyx. "You free later, Darien? I heard you know how to please a woman without nearly breaking her nose by passing out on her." She tossed another pointed look in Max's direction.

Darien choked on a laugh.

Maximus shifted in his seat. "Fuck me," he muttered. Glancing about, he brought up a hand to cup his brow, looking like if he could have any wish in the world granted, it would be to turn invisible.

"No, I'm not free," Darien replied, the words barely audible around his subdued laughter. "Now, if you're done picking on my friend—"

"Thank you," Maximus hissed, clapping his hands together in a prayer-like gesture.

Darien finished, "—then I'd love to hear what your Head has to say."

Lumen gave him a tight smile. "She wanted me to let you know that she is bowing out of this agreement. She has no interest in your title, and she respects that you are to lead the city's Darkslayers until you decide to move on. As for taking down the dealers, she wants no part in it."

Darien gave one slow blink. "Did she happen to tell you why?"

"She didn't say. And I know my place, so I didn't ask." Tucking a strand of hair behind an ear, the crescent moon tattooed below it reflecting a soft green under the murky lights, she added, "Though if you want my opinion, my mother has always weighed risk and reward carefully. She'd rather—"

"Stand back and let others get their hands dirty," Darien finished.

Lumen looked down her nose at them, assessing them both. "If you

want to put it that way.”

“Tell her that I respect her decision,” Darien began, “and that I trust she will stick to her end of the agreement in terms of maintaining peace and compliance with all houses.”

The way Lumen tilted her chin alerted Darien to the fact that she had picked up on the threat buried carefully beneath sugar-coated words.

Perfect.

“I’ll tell her,” the Warg said. She began to turn away, but paused, assessing Darien from head to toe. “If you change your mind, give me a call. It would be me and Umbrielle.”

“I’m good.”

“Suit yourself.” She left without another word, ignoring the sleazy gazes that tracked her through the building as she wove through the dense crowds, heading back the same way she’d come. Umbrielle eventually joined her, neither of them looking back as they took one of the tunnels out of the Doghouse.

Max said, “What do you think that’s all about?”

“I don’t know.” He took his phone out of the pocket of his pants and unlocked it. “But I’m going to find out.” Stretching his legs out in front of him, he sat back in his chair and dialed Malakai. He pressed the phone against his ear, straining to hear the line ring over the pounding music that shook the floor.

The Reaper picked up on the first ring. “Hey.”

“Channary backed out,” Darien said, concealing his voice with the bass of the music. “She’s touting her peace-not-war nonsense and pretending she’s accepting of my place as leader.”

“Horseshit,” Malakai spat.

“That’s what I said. I want eyes on Channary at all times. Watch her house, watch her Wargs. If anything even remotely interesting happens, I want to hear about it.” The last thing any of them needed was for Channary to snoop around and try to find out who Gaven was—and then spill the beans to the arms-dealing dickhead about Darien’s plans to take down his operation.

Shit. He thought he’d bought her out, but now that he was looking at it this way...

*Fuck!* How could he have been so goddamn stupid?

He forced himself to breathe, forced his fist to loosen where it hung between his spread legs. Just because he was jumping to this conclusion about Channary didn’t mean it was actually happening.

“Alright.” Malakai’s reply was barely audible over the sound of Darien’s heart pounding angrily in his ears.

Darien said, “I’ll be sending Conrad and Hanli too.” The two Angels were always more than willing to help. Darien had been friends with

them both for nearly as long as he'd known Dominic. Angels and Devils made good allies.

"Don't trust me?" There was a smile in Malakai's words.

"Not one bit."

Malakai's booming laughter shook the speaker. "Later, asshole."

"Later." Darien ended the call. He slipped his phone into his pocket and made to turn toward Max.

A heavy hand fell on the back of Darien's neck. It grabbed onto his shirt collar, pulling hard enough to choke, another hand doing the same to Max as a gruff male voice drawled in Darien's ear, "What're a couple of Devils like you doing in a place like this?"

That was a close one. Darien's hand relaxed in his lap. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tension leave Max's body as well, hand drifting away from the pistol he was packing near his hip.

Darien drawled, "You're lucky your voice is so recognizable, or we'd all be bleeding out on the floor right now."

The Butcher rose out of his crouch, let go of their collars, and grabbed a free chair at the table. He dragged it closer with a massive hand, metal scraping across pitted cement, and claimed the space between Darien and Max. "That sounds like a good time, a really good time." He plunked himself into the seat, sparked a half-smoked trip of Boneweed he fished out of the pocket of his tattered black trench coat, and stretched his long legs out in front of him.

Max assessed the BP dealer with amusement. "It feels weird to see you here. Kinda like running into a professor outside of school."

The Butcher growled a laugh. "I like to test the waters of my competition once in a while—see what I can do better." Smoke rippled from his lips. "Besides, I don't got any nice sets of tits in my joint like the ones here." Jerking his bearded chin at the stage, where a witch was twisting her body like a pretzel on a pole, he added, "Channary can really pick them, I'll give the Warg that."

Darien caught the attention of a passing server, waving her over to bring him another beer.

"What are you fucks doing here, anyway?" Casen asked, his foggy gaze fixed on the dancer's pierced nipples. "You were too busy pissing yourselves a minute ago to answer my question."

"We came to meet with Channary," Darien replied.

The server reached the table with a smile. After handing Darien a glass of beer, she lingered by his chair, her expression hopeful and expectant. He thanked her and waved her away.

Casen said, "That why I saw Lumen leaving here just now?"

"Yes."

"What'd she want?" He glanced at Darien, lips pinching another drag off the trip. "You the new king of Angelthene's Darkslayers, or



what?"

"Apparently."

"You don't sound like you want the title."

"It's a heavy one to carry."

The Butcher grunted. "You'll make it look easy, like you do everything else."

"Just because it looks easy doesn't mean it isn't hard."

"So what's the deal, then? Channary wanted to meet to negotiate some sort of deal with you, now that you're in charge?"

"On the contrary," Darien said, sipping on his beer. "She was backing out of one. The new guy who runs the MPU isn't a fan of Darkslayers, but he's willing to turn the other cheek to our operations if we help him take care of the arms dealers Randal used to work with."

"Gaven Payne, right?" Of course the Butcher would know his name. But whether or not the warlock knew Gaven's face was another thing entirely.

Not to mention details about his operations.

Darien dipped his chin in a nod. "You wouldn't happen to know where he keeps his supplies, would you?"

Casen shook his head, his dark shoulder-length hair swaying. "Nah. And I'd tell you, Cassel, you know that." He shook his head again, looking disgusted. "Fuck that prick. I hate his guts." Twisting in his seat, he leaned across the table and crushed the butt of the trip into the overflowing ashtray, staining his thick fingers gray. "I'll be glad to see his ass rot behind bars."

"What do you have against him?" Max asked.

"Nothin'. Just don't like him. I don't like many people, Maxy." A grin slashed across his face. "Especially ones that bring in more money than me. Is that really a surprise?"

Max shrugged.

"I bring in more money than you," Darien teased.

The Butcher knocked him in the shoulder with a huge fist. "Yeah, but you're hard to hate, kid. You ever gonna come fight at the Block, or do I have to beg you?"

"Maybe one day." If he got desperate enough.

"The Pit still cutting it for you?"

No. "For now," he lied.

Casen heaved himself to his feet with a grunt. "If you ever need anything from me, I'd be happy to help. Anything involving throwing scumbags behind bars is entertaining for me."

"Thanks," Darien said. "I'll keep that in mind."

The Butcher was several feet away, throwing one last glance over his shoulder at the dancer writhing spread-eagled on the stage, when

his offer made Darien think of something.

“Actually,” he called.

Casen turned, trench coat sweeping out around his towering form.

“If you’ve got any free men and an unused room,” he began. “I might’ve thought of something.”

---

Darien and Max were nearing the staircase that led up to the exit of the Doghouse—the set of doors that opened up from deep in the ground, just like a cellar—when the person Darien was calling picked up.

Christa’s smoky voice floated through the speaker, slurred just enough to suggest that he’d woken her up. “Darien?” He didn’t miss the note of hope in the question.

“You claim to look out for the people you care about,” Darien began. He and Max ascended the stairs, metal clanging under their boots. The stairwell was lit with crimson light that turned eyes into black pits and skin into freshly spilt blood. “How about looking out for me by telling me why your Head decided to back out of her end of the agreement?”

The line went silent, stretching on in a way that pushed Darien to look at the screen to make sure she hadn’t hung up.

The bouncer at the top of the stairs spotted them coming and threw open the heavy doors with a push of massive shoulders, revealing a canvas of stars diluted by a haze of light pollution. The Doghouse was on the southern end of Angelthene Boulevard, not far from the junction of Crystal Teeth and Redwater. The nightlife in these parts was filthier and harder than the kind farther north; that area was tamer and frequented by college kids who gambled with demons instead of criminals while they went bar- and club-hopping, banking on the slightly higher chance that they would return home without being drugged, killed, or assaulted.

Finally, Christa said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You always were good at lying.” They were outside now, the rusted doors peeling like a bell as the bouncers slammed them shut. The sidewalks here were lit with LED floodlights that felt like walking through a fever dream, but they were better at keeping demons away than HID and mercury vapor.

“Darien.” Her voice was a sleep-thickened croak. “I am not lying.”

“Alright, I believe you.” His car chirped as he unlocked it with the remote. He and Max got inside, shutting the doors on a warm gust of rotting meat and blood. There was exactly that on a stretch of pavement up ahead—a smear of blood and brains, the texture like

cauliflower. A demon attack, by the looks of it; very common in this part of town. Or a really grisly murder. "Think you can find out for me?" he said.

There was a long pause. He checked the phone again, but the numbers that kept track of the length of the call were still ticking.

When she finally answered, her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I'd be putting everything on the line."

"Oh I'm sorry, I forgot," he drawled. He started the car. "You can't do that, but you expect the same thing from others. A very good trait you've got going for you, Christa." He made to hang up.

"Wait." A sigh rattled the phone. "I'll see what I can find, and I'll call you. Okay?"

"Agreed."

"Please don't call me if it's about something like this again," she whispered. Darien didn't miss the subtle invitation in her words—the door she was leaving wide open for him.

He hung up before she had a chance to do it first.

Loren made her way to Agatha's the next day, hopping in a taxi as soon as her classes at Angelthene Academy were over.

Her lesson with the hedgewitch was taking place at a large worn table in the same room as yesterday, the door shut tight to the rest of the students and employees. Late-afternoon sunlight streamed in through the grimy arched windows, the warmth causing the plants and flowers cluttered atop the sills to rustle and stretch with happiness. It was one of the only sunny days they'd had in weeks, and Loren knew the plants weren't the only ones who were happy about it.

By the time the second hour was up, and not a single spark of her magic had manifested itself, Loren was growing antsy. She gripped her solar amulet in a fist, the metal sun rays digging into her palm as she tried to force it to draw her stubborn magic out of her body. But the stupid thing was about as useless as a chunk of ice, and it felt like one too.

Singer, sensing her agitation from where he observed the lesson in her shadow, gave a low whine that only she could hear.

*I hate this*, Loren whispered. She felt a phantom paw come down softly on her foot, a sigh whistling through his nose.

Agatha sat back in her seat. "Loren. Are you sure—"

Loren's eyes flashed up to Agatha's freckled face. "Do *not* ask me if I am sure that I have magic."

She lifted her hands in surrender. "Alright, I'm sorry. It's just... well, usually it doesn't take this long."

"But I'm different than your other students. It might take longer for me, but I can't have you giving up on me." She softened her tone as she added, "Please."

Agatha assessed her. There was nothing cold in her stare, just genuine curiosity. "I wonder if there is another way we might be able to encourage it."

Loren let go of the amulet. She slumped in her chair, the hard back digging into her spine. "What methods do you usually use?"

"Everybody has something that sets them off. It can be something they care very deeply about, something that makes them angry, something that makes them sad. For some people, it is an object, kind

of like your solar amulet.” She frowned. “But that isn’t working.” She blew out a sigh through pursed lips and drummed her fingers on the table.

“What about a potion?”

She thought it through. “All of our potions are designed for witches and warlocks, and even then, they are reliable less than half the time. I highly doubt they would work on you.”

Loren chewed her lip. “What about...” Slowly, she sat up in her seat, leaning forward to fold her arms on the table.

Agatha prodded, “What about what?”

Loren got to her feet so quickly, she startled Agatha. “I might have an idea.” She grabbed her bags and jacket and hurried to the door.

“Am I going to like it?” Agatha called.

“We’ll find out soon.” She would need a day or two to figure out how to do this, but as soon as the wheels were turning her way, she would be back here to finish this lesson.

—

When Loren got back to the academy, she locked herself in her dorm room in the House of Salt and fished her laptop out of the drawer of her nightstand. The chunky old thing’s battery was dead, so she plugged it in, sat on the side of the bed, and opened it on her knees, waiting for the screen to light up.

The fan was blowing hot air, and it was making a grinding sound that wasn’t promising, but she held out hope as she waited for the black screen to display something other than the white arrow frozen in the middle of it.

Finally, the welcome screen appeared. She signed in and got onto the internet. The arrow lagged as she pushed it toward the search bar. Muttering in anger, she tried not to throw the laptop at the wall as she clicked and started typing, watching the letters appear one by one.

She kept her search simple: *Venom*. The enter key briefly stuck as she struck it with her index finger.

The laptop grinded louder, the fan blasting hot air on her knees. A rainbow cursor appeared and began to spin, the whole page going white.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Come on.”

At last, the screen loaded. She leaned closer to read the first few paragraphs that popped up.

*Venom is an illicit street drug that gives hellsehers access to their magic on a greater scale. While the drug mostly appeals to the hellseher population, veneficae and lamiae have also been known to use the drug for*

*its stimulant effects.*

*Some have turned to Venom for more than recreational purposes, claiming the substance gives them relief to some of the symptoms of various chronic illnesses. However, it should be noted that any relief gained from the substance is temporary and should not serve as a replacement for remedies prescribed by a family doctor or Healer.*

*Although overdosing on Venom is not typically a concern, the side effects that come with using the drug are significant and should be taken seriously. One of the side effects is a sharp increase in the user's chances of contracting the Tricking.*

Loren drummed her fingers against her chin. All this research applied to hellsehers. But she was not a hellseher.

The keys stuck again as she typed in another search. The chatter of other students walking down the hall drifted under the door as she waited for the page to load, that stupid rainbow cursor spinning again. She was glad when she didn't recognize any of those voices. The last thing she needed right now was for Dallas or Sabrine to walk in and find her researching an illegal drug.

The page loaded bit by bit, and she started reading as soon as the new text appeared.

*Unlike other illegal street drugs, Venom can only be administered through one method, and that is in the form of eye drops. It is black in color, its consistency thick like oil. It may sting on impact and cause blurry vision that dissipates relatively quickly. People who take Venom usually have instant results that are stronger and more long-lasting than other drugs.*

Loren thought it through.

Stygian salt was the only other option she could think of that wouldn't make her want to scratch her own flesh off, but she wasn't sure it would be enough. She needed something extreme, something that would wake up her magic and let her fix this mess she'd walked into. She was born from the Arcanum Well, the same creation that had birthed hellsehers. She might be human, but she wasn't ordinary.

She had an idea. It might not work, but she was willing to try it.

—

"I can't believe we're driving a fucking van," Darien grumbled as he got into the driver's seat and shut the door. It was a black chunk of a vehicle that smelled like must and coolant and the cheap pine air freshener swinging from the rear-view mirror.

Darien ripped the thing off the mirror, causing the small bat Familiar hiding behind it to chirp in anger and flare his leathery wings. He hung upside down from the mirror, clawed feet gripping the support. Blood-red eyes narrowed in on Darien until they were nothing but tiny dots.

“Whoops,” Darien chuckled. “Sorry, Creature. Didn’t see you there.”

Creature gave another irritated chirp before draping his wings around his body and going back to sleep. The thing was always sleeping, even when the moon was high in the sky, just like it was now.

“I don’t know,” Malakai began with an audible smile, reaching across the van to stroke a finger down his disgruntled cocoon of a Familiar, who looked like he wanted to roll his red eyes again, “I think it kinda suits you. You look like one of those sports moms who wake up at the ass-crack of dawn to drive their kids to practice.”

Darien unrolled his window—*unrolled*, because the vehicle didn’t have automatic windows—and chucked the tree-shaped air freshener into the night. It fluttered away on a breeze that was more offensive than the air freshener—a slightly sulfurous cocktail of seafood, trash, and sludge that had sat for too long in backed-up storm drains.

Rolling the window up so hard he nearly snapped the crank handle off, Darien said, “If I’m the sports mom, then you’re the bratty fucking kid.” He punched Malakai in the side of the head, making him curse, and rolled the chunk of a van away from the Iron Dock. Al was still watching, along with several of the men who’d loaded up the van with six black crates.

For something so important to Gaven, the shipment wasn’t very big. This was another thing stumping Darien—and another question he wouldn’t be able to answer tonight. Whatever was in these crates had to go for a price that Gaven wouldn’t want to lose out on.

Darien’s plan for tonight had gone awry the moment they’d met Al at the dock, and the hellseher had announced they would be delivering the shipment in one of the vehicles from Gaven’s personal fleet. Now, they wouldn’t be able to pull to the side of the road on the way there to see what was in the crates—what was so important to Gaven that he’d wanted Darien to deliver them himself. Another thing to drag out this detective work and pluck his last nerve until he was living bomb.

Malakai muttered, “We’ve got company.”

Darien looked in the rear-view mirror to see two vans identical to this one tailing them. “I can see that.”

The van jostled when they hit a speedbump. Creature tightened his wings in irritation, eyes squinting open briefly before shutting again.

The sight of the Familiar caused Darien to think of something. He smacked Malakai in the arm to get his attention.

Malakai mouthed, "What?"

Darien raised his knee up so he could use it to steer, and he felt like an idiot as he made a gesture with his hands, doing his best to make them look like wings, and then pointed into the back of the van.

Malakai wore a stupid grin, looking like he had about a million insults he wanted to use on Darien for making that gesture, but at least he understood the suggestion. He spoke to Creature through his thoughts, waking the bat back up.

With a roll of his eyes, being far more dramatic than he needed to be, Creature fluttered into the back of the vehicle and peeked in through the crates. Darien watched the vans in the rear-view mirror.

A minute later, Creature flew over to perch on Malakai's shoulder.

Malakai mouthed, "Spell-protected."

Of course.

Neither of them said anything more as they drove to Casa Brewery. It wasn't safe to talk in a vehicle that wasn't their own; they would need to save their words for when they were alone again, without the chance of a hidden recording device hearing them.

It came as no surprise to Darien that the people picking up the crates were merely middlemen. Whoever was buying the contents of these crates were smart enough not to show their faces. Casa Brewery was a useless location as well—a mere pickup point that Darien knew was temporary, an assumption that was soon confirmed by the men who'd purchased the crates leaving the parking lot of the deserted brewery, disappearing down an unlit side road.

Another plan. Darien would have to think of another plan to find answers as to what Gaven was selling.

Two routes down, and one had gone to shit, with nothing useful to pass along to Finn.

Oh well. One for one was better than o for two.

—

"We were tailed," Darien said, chewing on a toothpick to curb his nicotine craving as he spoke to Solace on the phone. He and Malakai were back in his car, parked on a dark street around the corner from the Bonefish Market. "Middlemen picked up the delivery at Casa Brewery, and then we were tailed again back to the Iron Dock."

Finn swore. "Alright. How big was the delivery?"

"Six crates. They were all coated in concealment spells; we couldn't see inside." The tension Finn was exuding echoed Darien's own. The detective seemed to be getting as tired of this shit as Darien was.



Darien said, "Any news to report on your end?"

"The three hellseher autopsies will be completed by morning." That was fast. "I put the best pathologist at the General on the job."

"Give me a shout when they're done, will you?"

"I will."

Darien hung up and threw his phone onto the console, where it slid against the base of the windshield. He started the car and drove up the hill, taking the access road onto the highway, accelerating to merge with the sparse nightly traffic.

Malakai said, "What now?"

"Our best shot at getting answers lies in figuring out where Gaven keeps his supplies."

"I've got Brodie and Macen still on it. And when they're not on it, Sylvan and Valen are. Sooner or later, they'll need to find something. The guy's gotta check in on his supplies at some point..." His words trailed off as he studied Darien with a look of disgust.

"What?" Darien demanded.

"What's with the toothpick?"

"It's a distraction."

"From what?"

"I'm quitting smoking."

Malakai wheezed a laugh. A long, drawn-out wheeze that was soon shifting into booming laughter. "*You?* Quit smoking?" The wheezing returned. "That's a good one. What are you going to do next, get married and start going to Temple?"

Darien punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

"Hey!" Malakai swung back.

Darien barely turned his head on time, taking the hit on the back of it instead of the temple.

They kept swinging at each other, cursing and shouting. The car swerved. Horns blared from the lanes on either side of them, and some old lady with a puff of gray hair gave Malakai's tinted window the middle finger. Darien wondered why she was out this late; maybe she had reached the age of being fed up with life and simply not caring anymore, the same type of woman who would probably beat the daylight out of a demon or thief with her purse.

Darien admired that level of guts.

"Watch it!" Malakai bellowed.

Darien corrected the steering wheel before the car could collide with the barricade. "Fuck you."

"Yeah, fuck you too, you prick."

Darien leaned on his door, staring at the dark road flying by under the tires. "And so what if I wanted to do either of those things? I'm not open to judgement about anything in my life, least of all from

you.”

“Oh, I get it.” Malakai wore a knowing grin. Creature, who was hanging from the rear-view mirror, shared a glance with Malakai. “This is about your girl.”

“Mind your own business. I’m not in the mood for any filthy jokes about her, and if you try to make one, I might have to kill you.”

“Dude, you are in desperate need of that nicotine,” Malakai said, shaking his head. “Maybe while you sit there and chew on that toothpick like a self-righteous son of a fucking loser, you can enlighten me on these autopsies I heard Finn talking about.” Eavesdropper.

“Three dead hellsehers were found in the lake on Foxheart.”

“I saw that on the news. Why’re you interested in them?”

“In case there’s a connection.” Malakai didn’t know about Blue, at least not yet. And while this was the safest response for Darien to give the Reaper, it wasn’t a blatant lie. It had crossed Darien’s mind on more than one occasion that everything going on in the city was connected. He didn’t know how yet, but he wasn’t ruling out any possibilities.

Malakai was giving him the kind of stupid, incredulous stare that begged Darien to knock him out with one punch. “Between some Blood Stave dealers and three dead bodies?” The Reaper smirked. “That’s kind of a reach without any evidence, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Nothing shady that happens in Angelthene is a reach, Malakai.”

“Alright. While we’re at it, we might as well catch up with that granny who gave me the middle finger and find out who she offed, and where she dumped the body.”

“Whatever. I’ll let you know when I end up being right.”

Malakai smirked and slumped against his door. “You do that.”

“So? What’s the news?”

Darien stood across from Finn in the cold white hallway that led to the morgue in Angelthene General, fluorescent lights droning above their heads like hornets. According to Finn, the best pathologist at the General had been assigned to the task, conducting speedy but thorough autopsies on the bodies the MPU had found in the lake on Foxheart.

“They died from drowning,” Finn replied, leaning back against the spotless white wall, arms crossed. Not a big surprise, considering where they’d found the bodies. But that didn’t explain any connection to Blue, or how those men had ended up in the lake to begin with. Finn added in a lower volume, “But get this: they were already dead before they went in the lake, which means they drowned before they were even in the water.”

Darien blinked. Was he missing something? “My brain is fried from all these late nights. Can you dumb it down for me?”

“They *drowned*,” Finn said with a hiss, holding his hands out in front of him for accentuation, “before they got in the *water*.”

Darien stared at him with an expression as blank as his mind.

Finn threw his hands in the air. “They *drowned*—”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time!” Darien barked, his voice startling a nurse who was bustling by. He mumbled an apology to her and managed to lower his voice to a whisper as he said to Finn, “How can someone drown if they’re not in water?”

Finn sighed and scrubbed both hands over his face. “I’m sorry, I just— I’m totally stumped.” He let his hands fall against his sides, exhaustion lining his face. “But the autopsy revealed the bodies were dead for at least an hour before they got in the lake.” Finn wet his lips, eyes glancing about to make sure no one was looking. “And get this: the lake—it was filled with blood. So much blood, Darien, it’s like someone scooped out all the water and replaced it with blood.”

Darien’s phone started buzzing. He took it out and checked the caller identification before answering. “Cassel.” He walked several feet away from Finn, giving himself some privacy for the call. He listened, staring down the quiet hallway.

“I spoke to Sylvan and Valen,” Malakai said. “They’ve figured out where G keeps some of his shit.” Perfect. And right on time, considering that major failure of a mission last night.

Darien said, "You free tonight?"

"Free as a bird."

"I'll pick you up. Did they tell you a good time?"

"Be at my house at ten p.m. That should give us more than enough time to get there."

"I'll have my truck. Make sure you're ready." He hung up and walked back over to Finn, who looked like he was running on five minutes of sleep, and about one second away from tearing his hair out.

That made two of them.

"Please tell me you have good news," Finn said.

"If you consider where Gaven keeps the bulk of his stock good news, then yeah, I have some for you."

Finn put his hands together in prayer and looked up through the white ceiling. "Thank the Star."

"I'm out of here. You're on your own with this whole drowned-bodies thing."

"Be careful, Cassel. And call me when you're done."

Darien waved him away. He stalked up to the elevators, poking one of the buttons hard enough to make the light flicker. As he waited for the elevator, he kept his eyes on the tiny black screen, floor numbers flashing in red light...and started thinking.

Blue had managed to escape those men. The core of her aura was blue—according to Max, bluer than any aura he'd seen before. The Fleet had a Special Task Force called Elementals.

Elementals...

Was it possible that Blue had killed those men to escape a hostage situation, and had used her magic to do it? Nothing like this had ever been heard of before, not in the whole of Terra, but...but was it possible that her blue magic was linked to water, and she'd drowned the men with it before dumping their bodies—and their car—in the lake? There were a small number of hellsehers who had the rare ability to bend elements, but no one had ever been able to summon them out of nothing.

He dialed Dominic as he got in the empty elevator.

The line crackled as Dominic picked up. "What's up, Dare?"

Darien punched the button for the ground floor. "Ask Blue if she killed those men, and ask her how she did it." The elevator doors slit shut with a hiss.

A beat of tense silence fell. "What's going on?"

Darien filled him in quickly, and when he was done, the line went silent again. Elevator music tinkled through the speaker as the platform plummeted down to the ground floor. The walls in here were covered in mirrors. Darien avoided looking in every single one of

them. If it weren't for the fact that elevators had mirrors to assist people in wheelchairs, he probably would've shattered all of them.

"One second," Dom said. The one second he asked for turned into seven minutes, and by the time he was back on the line, Darien was out of the hospital and in his car, closing the door on a rare sunny day that heated up the black paint. Dominic sighed. "She's not talking. Maybe she's afraid that if she admits to killing those men, we'll turn her in."

"Do whatever you can to get more information out of her without making her want to run off."

"I'm on it. But can you do me a favor and fill me in on what you're thinking?"

"I just finished speaking with Finn at the General. The autopsies on those three dead hellseers revealed that they died by drowning, but listen to this: they were already dead *before* they went in the lake."

"But they died by drowning?"

"Yes. And the reason I'm asking how Blue killed them is because her magic is blue. What if she has water magic? And what if she can't just control the element, but can also summon it out of nothing?"

"Holy shit," Dominic breathed. "You're a sharp one."

"It doesn't always feel like it, but thanks."

"I think I hear her coming," Dominic said quietly. "Talk soon?"

"Later."

Loren woke up in her dorm room at the academy and saw a shadow standing by the door. Long limbs flayed about, the ends of them flopping through the air like fins. The head was weird and saggy, and whatever this thing was, it was breathing heavily.

A scream built in her throat, but she swallowed it when the shadow banged its foot against the closet door.

“Mother trucker!” a voice hissed.

Loren sat up. “Dallas?”

Dallas pulled down the twisted hood that was stuck over her head and shoved it into proper position. Her magnificent white wings were rustling; trying to put clothes on with those things in the way would take some getting used to. She’d had to stock up her wardrobe with wing-friendly outfits.

“Go back to sleep,” Dallas whispered, shaking her long sleeves back.

“Where are you going?” Loren asked, keeping her voice down so she wouldn’t wake Sabrina. She glanced at the clock. “It’s Witching Hour.”

“I just need some air.” She made for the closed door.

“It isn’t safe!” Loren threw aside the quilts and got to her feet, the cold floor icing her bare toes. “If you don’t let me come with you, I’m telling one of the professors.”

“I’ll be fine, Lor.” She cracked open the door. A draft blew in, raising a chill on Loren’s chest and arms. “I promise.”

She crossed her arms. “Where are you *really* going? You’ve snuck out on more than one occasion. I think I deserve to know where my sister has been going so late at night.” As she said it, her stomach twisted with guilt.

If only she could tell Dallas what was going on with her. But if Dallas was keeping secrets, it was by choice, not a spell.

Loren had wondered for some time now where Dallas was sneaking off to throughout the school week. For a while, she’d assumed she was leaving to hook up with Maximus. After all, since Kalendae Loren herself tended to disappear on random days of the week. She would sprint out to the gates after dusk to meet with Darien, where she would either spend a few hours in his car or return with him to Hell’s Gate until dawn.

But Loren suspected there was something else going on here. They

were sisters; she knew Dallas well enough to tell when she was lying. The problem with Dallas, however, was that she had a tendency to hold onto her secrets forever, even when confronted.

Dallas sighed, hand gripping the door knob. "The Umbra Forum."

Loren's mouth popped open. "Are you *crazy*?" When Sabrina stirred in her bed by the windows, quilts rustling, Loren lowered her voice to a hiss. "What could you possibly need from that place—"

"Enchanted stationary."

Loren lifted a brow. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised; Dallas was having trouble keeping up with her studies, thanks to the time she had to spend training with the Aerial Fleet. But something still didn't add up. "Uh-huh. Right. Enchanted stationary from the number one drug hub in Angelthene." But her own words had her thinking of the plan she'd formed at Agatha's yesterday...the plan she hadn't figured out how to follow through with.

Until now.

"I told you that's where Max buys it," Dallas said.

Loren grabbed her coat off the hook on the door. "I'm coming with you," she whispered.

The rings around Dallas's pupils shone in the dark. "I can't agree to that, Lor. It's too dangerous."

"It's hardly less dangerous for you than it is for me. Besides, I've got the perfect disguise."

"If you think you'll be protecting me by coming with—"

"Don't be ridiculous. There's something I want from there too."

"Which is...?" Dallas prompted.

"Venom."

It was hard to see in the dark, but she thought Dallas's eyebrows had shot up. It was a probable reaction. "What for?"

"For me." When Dallas gave her a blank stare, Loren explained, "I can't bear to see Darien suffering from his Surges anymore. I want to try to get my magic back, and if Venom is the key, then..." She pulled her shoulders up in a shrug. "Then I am willing to risk it."

Dal's eyes narrowed. "I thought you guys weren't talking."

"That's just...temporary."

"You're not still upset about what happened in their basement, are you? I mean, what did you think he did? Offed people with too many sleeping pills and laid them down for a peaceful rest?"

"No." Definitely not. But this was the best excuse she had to stay away from him for the week.

"Well, you'll need to start talking to him eventually." Dallas hesitated, shifting on her feet. "Max said he's having a rough time."

The words were like a fist punching through her stomach, digging up through her ribcage and ripping out her heart.

Dallas must've seen the hurt on her face, because she sighed. "Alright. Let's see this disguise you were talking about."

---

It really was the perfect disguise.

Dressed in the white bodysuit the imperator had given her, the skin below her ear branded with one of Kyle's temporary tattoos, she could almost pass for Lace as she stepped out of the taxi, Dallas doing the same on the opposite side of the vehicle.

The driver unrolled his window. "Tell dispatch you need a van next time, will ya?" he called. The guy was complaining because of how much space Dallas's wings had taken up in the back seat, the feathers hitting him in the head a few times when she'd first got in.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Dallas muttered. She slammed her door shut harder than she needed to. "Asshole."

The driver pulled away, leaving them standing beside the river, not far from the buildings and hazy lights of the Umbra Forum. A low veil of fog clung like damp wool to everything in sight.

"We should hurry," Dallas said. "That spell won't last long, and if you start smelling like delicious human meat, we are both done for."

"Witch meat smells just as good," Loren joked as they began picking their way through the shadows, the river rushing at their backs. Serpents rumbled in its depths, water splashing the sidewalk.

They took the same path Darien had led them down last year, avoiding the alleys and the weeping creatures tucked behind dumpsters. Cheers, stomping feet, and thumping music dribbled out of the warehouse that belonged to Casen Martel, the fighting ring known as the Chopping Block. Loren recognized the werewolf bouncer standing out front, but he didn't seem to recognize them, staring out at the maze of vendors with an expression that screamed he was bored to tears.

"We should split up," Loren said. "We'll both find what we need faster that way."

"*Split up?*" Dallas hissed, her hand closing around Loren's arm. "If I leave your side, I won't be able to live with myself if you're dragged into that blood farm—"

"No one's ever proven that it exists," Loren interrupted, clinging to her own statement like it was a life raft. "Besides, no one's even interested in me. See?" She shot a cursory glance at the people milling about, who shied away from her attention the moment they saw the tattoo below her ear, the mark she had purposely left visible by braiding her hair over one shoulder.

They really believed she was Lace Rivera. It was a good thing



Dallas had perfected the spell that concealed her human scent, or they likely would've been sniffed out by now and sold to the highest bidder.

Dallas pointed a stern finger in her face. "Meet me back here in no more than ten minutes, or I am throwing us both to the wolves and calling Darien."

"Deal."

They split up. Loren had no clue where she might find Venom dealers, but her online research had taught her all about the symbol they marked their storefronts with.

As she walked, weaving her way around stalls and people whose faces were shadowed with heavy hoods, she scanned the metal doors of the shops in the warehouses, searching for the symbol—a skull with bleeding black eyes. She was painfully aware of how truly alone she was. The lack of a dangerous Darkslayer guarding her back made her feel stripped down to her skin, but she was careful not to let it show on her face.

Eventually, she spotted the symbol on the sidewalk out front of a narrow door covered with rusting bars. The skull had been drawn on the pavement with sparkly white-and-black spray paint. It was so tiny, she almost walked right by.

She stepped up to the door and rapped her fist against the bars three times, the thick glove of her bodysuit stopping her from registering the pain. The rattle of metal rang through the night, drawing the attention of a couple creepy-looking warlocks loitering by an alley up ahead.

Loren jerked her chin at them. "What the hell are you looking at?"

They dropped their eyes to the filthy pavement.

Loren couldn't stop the smile that teased her lips.

A moment later, the door cracked open. "What do you want?" came a reedy voice.

"Thirty milliliters," she said firmly. "And make it quick."

The door opened wider, the scarred face of a woman—half-human, half-witch—peeking through.

Loren tilted her head, allowing the green bulb mounted by the door to fall upon her tattoo.

The woman shut the door. Chains rattled as locks slid off their latches, and a moment later she opened the door wide, tucking herself partway behind it. She didn't say anything, but she tipped her head, the invitation sending Loren stepping over the threshold.

Loren worked to keep her breathing calm as the door shut behind her, the assortment of locks clicking and rattling.

"Wait here," the woman rasped. She disappeared into a room down the hallway, spongy carpet sinking under her grubby bare feet.

Loren stayed put. She scanned the area: the cement walls, the stained countertops, the collection of fruit rotting in a bowl on the kitchen table, the glass equipment and obsidian pots that were used for cooking up Venom. It reeked in here, the unbearable stench of the drugs churning her stomach. It smelled like hot, bubbly tar.

Finally, the woman returned, offering up a small glass bottle, thick black liquid inside. Loren reached for the bottle—

The woman drew it back into the folds of her ratty sweater. With a baring of teeth riddled with cavities, she said, “A thousand gold mynet.”

Right. She almost forgot about this part. Good thing she had been saving her money lately. It certainly helped that Darien always insisted on paying for everything, no matter how small the cost, and no matter how much she begged him not to. He was always faster than she was when it came to getting his wallet out, and every employee, no matter the business, was more willing to accept the Darkslayer’s money than they were hers, lest they face his unspeakable wrath.

Quickly, she reached into a pocket in the thigh region of her bodysuit and pulled out a wad of bills.

The woman snatched the money from her, stuffed it into a fist, and shoved the eyedrops into Loren’s waiting hand. “You didn’t get it from me,” the woman said, her voice barely a mumble.

Loren left without another word, being careful not to thank the woman as if she were operating a clothing store.

The door pushed open easily, the bars rattling as she shut it behind her, sealing off the fetor of what the woman cooked inside her walls. If she was allowed to deal Venom, it was likely that she handed over a hefty percentage of her profits to the Butcher, the lead Blood Potions dealer in the state. No one was allowed to sell drugs on his turf, and only a fool would dare to do so, especially so close to the hub of his business.

A clap of thunder shook the city, the sound like two giant boulders cracking together.

She barely made it three feet down the sidewalk before rough hands were grabbing onto her, clamping over her mouth before she had a chance to scream.

“If this goes on for much longer,” Malakai said, mouth stretching into a wide yawn that showed all his teeth, “I might have to take a power nap.”

They were in Darien’s truck, a vehicle he seldom drove, which was why he’d opted to bring it to this part of town instead of his car. If this all went to shit, and Gaven’s men spotted them, there was less of a chance that someone would recognize his truck than they would his car.

They were in the outskirts of Black Alder, a seedy area in a seedy district overflowing with thieves, carjackers, demons, and gang members. Initially, Darien had wondered why Gaven would dare to keep a supply of his precious weapons in a place like this, but the longer he thought about it, the more it made sense. One more type of criminal activity added to a district that was already full to bursting with shady dealings, all of which the law enforcement couldn’t keep up with, was unlikely to draw attention. If they were to set up their stores in a high-end district instead, there was a greater chance that someone would report their activity to the MPU. Out here, demons roamed freely, the lack of lights allowing them to venture on main roads. What few lights did exist were mainly mercury vapor, the foggy green bulbs far too weak to classify as a safety measure. Only predators walked this ground, and predators were far less likely to report a crime than prey.

Darien blinked his burning eyes, keeping his gaze locked on the warehouse squatting on the road, just down the hill from where they were parked. Men guarded the perimeter of the building, three on all sides, all of them hellsehers, all of them armed to the teeth.

The watch on Darien’s wrist read one a.m. “Brodie said they switch out at one?”

Malakai nodded, eyelids drooping shut. His chin rested on scarred knuckles, elbow propped up on his door. “His words,” Malakai confirmed.

It was what he and Malakai were waiting for. The next watch shift that was set to arrive at one consisted of warlocks and vampires, all of which would be easier to deal with than the men currently prowling the premises. While Darien was always up for a challenge, it was better if they took the easier option this time, the one that guaranteed fewer errors. Vampires and warlocks would be far easier to

manipulate mentally, should their plan to incapacitate the men before they could see their faces went awry. Hellsehers, on the other hand, were insusceptible to mind magic, a risk that simply wasn't worth it for this.

Darien checked his watch again. "It's two minutes past one now, and I don't see any shift change."

Malakai's sharp inhalation, the sound almost a snort, told Darien he was half-asleep.

Darien smacked him in the shoulder, making him jolt. "Would you wake the fuck up?"

"I am awake," he slurred. He sat up, knuckling his eyes, and cleared his throat. "How does your girl feel about you doing this?"

Darien stiffened. "She's supportive enough," he offered tightly.

"How'd you end up scoring her, anyway?" Malakai asked. "I didn't know you had a thing for human girls."

"I don't," Darien mumbled. "But I have a thing for her."

"I don't blame you, she's got a tight little ass."

Darien whipped his head around to face Malakai, nostrils flaring wide. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

Malakai's shoulders shook with laughter. "What? It's a compliment."

"You're forgetting my two rules."

"I remember them perfectly," Malakai grumbled.

"Oh yeah?" Darien's tone was threatening. "Then what are they?"

"Keep secrets from each other and make jokes about your girl's perfect pussy."

Darien lunged across the truck. He punched Malakai in the face, fist glancing off his cheek as the Reaper ducked his head to the right. An open palm smacked Darien in the face, flattening his nose as Malakai pushed him back—

"Stop, stop, stop!" Malakai shouted.

"Get your hand off my face or I'll bite it—"

"Look!"

Gripping Malakai by the jacket, jaw clenched with anger, Darien followed his line of sight.

A van was crawling down the road below, the glow of its headlights bleaching the pavement that was riddled with potholes.

Darien let go of Malakai with a shove that knocked the Reaper's head into his window. "Showtime," he said quietly, placing a hand on the steering wheel and his chin on his knuckles, watching closely as the van lurched to a stop right out front of the warehouse.

In under five minutes, the shifts had switched. The hellsehers that had been guarding the perimeter of the building piled into the van and drove away, the new group assuming their positions. There was

less of them now—only six, which would make this plan a cinch.

“Ready?” Darien turned to Malakai to see him dripping Venom into his eyes, head tipped back against his seat.

He put the cap back on, scrubbing away the single dark tear that dripped like ink down his cheek, and offered the bottle to Darien. “Sure you don’t want any?” Black webbing spread through the skin around his eyes and on his temples.

“I’m sure.” He cracked open his door. “I’ve got enough salts in my system to keep me floating till dawn.”

They got out of the truck, closing the doors softly behind them. Mortifer had cloaked the truck tonight with spells that made the black paint blend into the night, making it harder for someone to spot the vehicle if they were to drive by. The thought put Darien at ease as they crept down the road, sticking to the dense shadows where demons picked at old bones. Glowing eyes watched them from the dark but made no move to approach. The predators here were tiered, and the ones on the bottom rung were smart enough to know their place.

When they were nearing the warehouse, Darien clicked his tongue, motioning for Malakai to take the men on the left while he went in on the right.

In under three minutes, they had downed all the men, rendering them unconscious instead of killing them. There were cameras mounted on every corner, but Darien paid them no mind; earlier that night, at Hell’s Gate, Tanner had hacked the security system, and Darien knew he was currently following through with masking the live feed with old footage. No one would see. No one would know.

Malakai came around the left-front corner of the building just as Darien came from the right. They met each other at the front doors, skin and clothes taking on an eerie green hue in the floodlights.

Darien took out his phone and pulled up the same security software Tanner was currently watching. The numbers ticked down on the screen, Ancient Reunerian that showed precisely when they would be able to open the door. No locks were on the latches. Locks weren’t needed if you could afford the best spells.

He murmured, “Three, two, one...”

When zero flashed on the screen, Darien and Malakai rolled up the metal door, stepping through the now-empty area where a wall of spells had previously buzzed.

Inside the warehouse were stacks upon stacks of identical silver briefcases. There had to be over two hundred of them.

Boots clapped on cement as they walked into the big open space, using their Sight to check for any spells or other deterrents for thieves.

“Since when do Blood Staves get their own shiny briefcases?”

Malakai asked, his husky voice echoing.

Darien stopped in front of one of the stacks. They were carefully placed, not a scratch on them. He pulled one off the top and set it on the ground, crouching down before it. As he flipped open the latches and lifted the lid, Malakai came over, squatting down beside him.

Darien breathed, "What the hell is this shit?"

Inside the briefcase, nestled in the hollows of a velvet protective casing, were seven cylinders made of glass. The substance inside them bubbled like soda, each cylinder containing a different shade. Red, orange, yellow, green, purple, white, and black. There was less of the last two than there were the others; the black and white tubes hardly had anything in them.

"To answer your question," Malakai began, "I have no idea what this shit is." He turned his head to look at Darien, hair swaying. "But it looks like we've got an even bigger problem than we thought."

These weren't Blood Staves. He didn't even know if they were weapons at all.

Malakai leaned in for a closer look. "Do you think they're drugs?"

Darien shrugged. "If Gaven's selling weapons *and* drugs, then the MPU is going to hit the jackpot when we throw him behind bars."

An evil chuckle slipped through Malakai's lips.

Darien scanned the colors again. Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Purple. White. Black.

Holy shit.

"What's missing?" he asked Malakai. Adrenaline sparked in his veins, spurring his heart into a sprint.

Malakai frowned. "Huh?"

Darien rolled his eyes. "What does this look like to you?" He waved an impatient hand at the colors inside the briefcase.

Malakai scanned the contents again. "A rainbow?"

"A rainbow," Darien confirmed. "And what's missing?"

He looked again. "Blue."

Darien nodded. "Blue."

—

The men threw Loren into the back of a van that was parked down one of the unlit alleys of the Umbra Forum. The tape on her mouth kept her from screaming, and the rope on her wrists and ankles kept her from fighting, as she was literally dumped into the van like a bag of trash. Glass bottles clinked as she hit the floor, where she rolled into stacks of crates, bruises forming on her arms and legs.

They had Dallas too. Loren caught sight of the witch, lying there among crates of what looked like Blood Potions—another of the things

they planned on selling, not including the witch and the human they'd just scored from the Umbra Forum. Dallas's eyes were wide with fear, her mouth taped shut too.

"She'll sell for a high price," said one of the men, gauging her worth with a slimy gaze that made her want to cover up.

"Lace Rivera," another laughed. He hawked and spat a foaming glob of saliva on the ground. "Almost had me fooled."

The crunch of boots stopped the men from closing the doors. Loren craned her neck to see, but too many bodies blocked whoever was approaching the vehicle from view.

This was it, wasn't it? They would take them to the blood farm, the horrible place some hopeful people claimed was only a rumor. If it were real, it would be a fate infinitely worse than death.

But then someone spoke, and she recognized the voice as soon as it floated through the night—gravelly and bass. "What did I fucking tell you guys about dealing on my property?" the Butcher drawled. "Selling shit out the back of your van to my paying customers?"

Loren tried to scream around the tape cutting into her mouth. Dallas joined in, wriggling among the crates to make as much noise as possible, but the thunder rumbling overhead drowned them out.

One of the men said, "We weren't selling shit."

"Then step aside and show me the evidence. If you're telling the truth, maybe I won't cut you into pieces."

The Butcher stomped up and looked inside the van, but it wasn't the crates of Blood Potions he noticed first. His eyes widened as he took in Loren...and then widened again as he took in Dallas.

Fury swept across the Butcher's face. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

The men drew their weapons, but they weren't as quick as the Butcher and the guys who flanked him.

Machine guns were out. The whole alley lit up with light and sound that knifed into Loren's eardrums. Bodies were honeycombed with bullets, the flashes of light stinging her eyes. A mixture of sulfur and saltpeter swept through the air as every last bullet was fired. Blood sprayed the walls, the smell calling demons forth from shadows.

When the noise finally faded, all the shots used up, what was left was a deafening ringing deep in her ears, making it difficult to hear the Butcher when he jerked his unshaven chin at the van. "Cut them free."

Two of the Butcher's men stepped up to the van. They dragged Loren and Dallas to the edge of the loading space and helped them sit up straight. Knives cut through the rope on their wrists and ankles. Loren's cheeks and lips burned as she peeled the tape off her mouth, Dallas doing the same at her side.

The Butcher threw his gun to the ground. The look on his face made them both shrink. "You girls are going to tell me what the hell you are doing here," he said, his booming voice—no longer muffled by the aftermath of gunshots—quieting the cries of the starved demons farther down the alley, "and you are going to tell me right now."

Dallas made the mistake of smirking, elbow nudging Loren in the ribs. "He's going full dad on us."

The Butcher pointed a meaty finger in her face. "Give me attitude one more time, Bright, and I'll tan your ass."

Dallas gulped.

Loren stood, gravel crunching under her feet. "We were buying enchanted stationary."

A scarred hand swept back the strands of hair that had wriggled free of her braid, exposing the symbol below her ear. "And playing dress-up while you're at it!" he growled. "You should know you can get killed for that—impersonating a Darkslaying circle, are you fuckin' nuts? If you weren't in with the Devils, they'd drag you underground and skin you alive." Loren didn't doubt that.

Her voice was as small as she suddenly felt. "We didn't mean anything by—"

"A bit of magic paper ain't worth your lives," Casen growled, the silver rings around his pupils flashing. "Lesson learned? Or are you going to be fucking stupid again?"

"Lesson learned," they said in unison.

He scowled at them for another few seconds. "Salv and Bugsy will drive you home." The two men stepped forward, guns still at the ready.

"Thank you," Loren offered to Casen.

"Don't let me catch you here again without someone bigger and scarier to protect you," he said. "Got it?"

"Got it," they both replied.

They were following Salv and Bugsy out of the alley, the Butcher and his other men walking the opposite way, demons shrinking from their advance, when Dallas paused.

"Don't tell Darien and Max, yeah?" she called.

The Butcher half-turned, glowering over his giant shoulder. He grumbled a string of curse words that sounded more like a dog growling.

Loren took that as a yes.



The colors inside the glass containers were hypnotizing.

Max had been staring at the contents of the open briefcase in the dining room at Hell's Gate for so many minutes that by the time he pulled his focus away from them and looked at Darien, the colors had stained his vision.

Dominic and Malakai were here too, the Reaper having been filled in on what was happening with Blue, much to the irritation of the Angel of Death constantly looming at her side.

Max had to admit it was entertaining to be in the same room as these two. They were always looking for a reason to beat the shit out of each other, a reaction Malakai seemed to earn from people quite often. It was possible that the Reaper had more enemies in this city than anyone.

"It would be a whole lot easier if we could just take a peek at her mind, hey?" Max gestured to Blue, who stood beside Dominic. Her arms were crossed, and her face was pinched, her eerily blue gaze fixed on the briefcase. But Max knew his suggestion was useless due to the limits on hellseher mind magic. It was possible to *put* things into a person's mind as long as that person wasn't a hellseher, or hadn't undergone training to hone their brains to block out such attacks, but taking anything out...

When Dominic spoke, his voice made Blue visibly jump, despite that he was speaking softly, stumbling through a question in Ilevyn.

Darien, who had one boot propped up on a chair he'd pulled out from the table, elbows resting on his knee, said to Dominic, "What are you asking her?"

"If she knows what these are." Dom gestured to the briefcase.

Blue stepped up to the dining room table and slid her pale fingers along the edges of the briefcase. Everyone fell silent, even Dominic and Malakai, who had been volleying insults at each other nonstop since the moment they'd walked into the same room.

"Red." Blue's voice was a hoarse whisper as she dragged her left hand over the first glass tube.

Malakai and Darien shared a glance.

Then she moved onto the second. "Orange." Her throat shifted with a swallow. "Inferno."

Max blinked. He'd heard that before—in Witchlight, when Blue

had pointed at Dallas. Max had been under the impression that Blue was talking about Dal's hair color, but maybe...

No. That didn't make any sense. Dal's aura was not red. It looked nothing like Blue's—didn't have the same vibrancy, the same solid core color blazing like a flame.

Blue's hair swished as she looked over her shoulder at Dominic. He stepped up to her side just as she was brushing her fingers across the red and orange tubes, the glass of them tinkling under her short nails. She said again, "Inferno, Dominic. Inferno."

"Inferno." Dom nodded in encouragement, though he looked as lost as everyone else likely felt. "Inferno, okay. I hear you. What about these other ones here?"

Lightly, she tapped her index finger on the third one. "Yellow. Aether." Her eyes settled on the fourth. "Green. Terra Firma."

Max glanced at Darien, but his expression gave nothing away.

She paused, gesturing to the gap of black velvet between the green cylinder and the purple one. "Missing," she whispered.

Dominic said, "Blue...." He asked her a question in Ilevyn that Max thought he understood the gist of, and when she replied, he found that he was right.

"Blue," said Blue with a firm nod. "Mist. Missing."

Malakai tried to ask a question. "Why would blue—"

"Shut the hell up," Dominic interrupted, dark hair swaying as he glared at Malakai over a shoulder. "Can't you see that she's speaking?"

Malakai's lip curled back over his teeth as he pointed toward the kitchen. "If you want to pick up where we left off, Dominic, I see a meat cleaver on the counter—"

"Please," Darien said in a voice as tired as he looked, "shut up. Both of you."

Dominic said, "I didn't—"

"Shut. Up. Please." Darien blinked heavily. "I am tired."

As soon as their grumbling quieted down, both Malakai and Dom uncurling their fists, Blue moved onto the purple one. "Aether."

Next was white. "The Eye."

This time, Darien looked at Max first. Max could tell from the look on his face that Darien's mind had drifted to Loren. Loren—and the aura she'd poured out of her body on Kalendae, shielding the whole city from the explosion that would've leveled every building and killed every person, leaving nothing standing.

Whenever Loren's aura wasn't white, it was rainbow. Aside from black, it was every single color in this briefcase, and then some. Whatever these cylinders were, it seemed they might be connected to Loren. Possibly. Max just wasn't sure how.

Last was black. A liquid so dark, it looked like bottled ink. There

was less of this shade—and the white—than there were the others.

Blue paled, her lips parting. “Void,” she said shakily. Her hand hovered over the glass cylinder, as if she feared touching it. “The Void.”

“What are they?” Darien asked. “Do you know?”

Dominic started to translate his question, but Blue had come far this last while, and she was able to understand Darien’s question on her own.

“Magic,” she said. “Spirit. *Soul*.” A pause. “Hellseher magic.”

Darien was staring at the containers again. Looking but clearly not seeing. “Auras,” he said, face smoothing with realization. “Aura magic.”

—

Darien snapped the briefcase shut. “We need to get these back to the warehouse before Gaven notices they’re gone, but first I want to find out where they came from, what they’re for...” He looked at the others. “And who’s buying them.” He pulled his phone out of his jeans and scrolled through his list of contacts.

“Want to fill the rest of us in on where your brain’s at?” Malakai asked, watching with crossed arms as Darien paced by the island.

“I’m calling Arthur,” Darien replied. “I want to see if he knows anything about this.” He found Art’s name and hit CALL.

From the moment Blue had identified the contents of the briefcase as aura magic, dread had curled in Darien’s stomach. There was nearly a complete spectrum in that briefcase. Where they came from, he didn’t know. Or maybe *who* they came from was the better way to put it.

Loren had a rainbow aura. Loren—

Darien forced himself to breathe. Loren was fine; this magic did not belong to her. Blue had said it was hellseher magic. *Hellseher*.

Three rings later, and Arthur’s voice drifted through the speaker. “I was beginning to think you’d dropped off the face of Terra.”

“I’m not that lucky. You ever heard of hellseher aura magic being assigned to different categories?”

“Could you be more specific?”

Darien paced faster, boots thumping. “Blue has blue magic and a blue aura,” he began.

“So I’ve been told,” Arthur prompted.

“Ever heard of something called the Mist?”

If Darien thought Arthur was paying attention before, it was nothing compared to the emotion he now felt coursing through the phone. “It was a subcategory of Arcane Magic.”

“What’s that?”

“A type of very strong magic lost a long time ago. Abilities that are now myth, and considered far from the truth.”

“What if it wasn’t a myth,” Darien said, “and someone’s managed to bring it back?” Whatever the hell *it* even was. His head was spinning.

“Then I would tell you to ask yourself why they’d want to.”

“Where would *you* look for the answer?”

“On the surface. Some things aren’t always as deep as you think.”

Darien had a thought. An idea that might not get them anywhere, but he was willing to try. At the core of the idea was the Arcanum Well—the ancient artifact that was the only logical explanation for any of this, and the only conclusion he could think to draw.

But he had another plan he would attempt first. Something that might give them answers faster than translating. Something that was slightly less risky than going back to the old house on Bernard and Tulsen with nothing to back up the decision but a hunch.

“Thanks, Arthur,” Darien said.

“I trust you’ll fill me in at some point?”

“Need-to-know basis.”

Arthur sighed softly. “I’m sure the need will come soon.”

So was Darien. Because as soon as he retrieved what might bring them some answers—that is, if he didn’t get the answers he sought from his first plan—he would need Art’s help.

Art was better at translating Ancient Reunerian than he was. And he didn’t feel like stewing over an old piece of parchment again, at least not this soon. Especially when he considered where he would have to go to find that parchment. Needless to say, he wasn’t looking forward to it.

Darien hung up. “Malakai.”

The Reaper had been staring at the briefcase in thought, brow creased. He looked up at the sound of his name.

“You up for an abduction?”

“Does it involve torture?”

“Of course.”

Silver canines glinted with a smile. “Sounds like a party.”

“Hey, kid.” The Butcher’s voice rumbled through Darien’s phone speaker, punctuated by the thumping of music in the background. The noise never stopped in the Chopping Block, not even now, at ten in the morning.

“You got that room I asked you about?” Darien leaned forward in the driver’s seat of his truck so he could see the warehouse in the Black Alder District better. The watch shift had just switched for the day. He and Malakai were here to collect one of those poor fuckers walking the perimeter of the building.

Someone would be getting a makeover today.

The Butcher’s smile was audible. “For you? You bet I do.”

“I’m going to need it in a few hours. I don’t want to bring any more guests to my house, if you get what I’m saying.”

Casen’s reply was thick with the kind of pride a father would have for his son. “Well, I’ve got plenty of room for your *guests* here.”

“See you soon.”

“I’ll make sure their stay is comfortable,” Casen joked. He hung up, a wheezing laugh crackling through the speaker.

Malakai rubbed his hands together with excitement. “I’m starting to like being friends with you again.”

“Friends is a generous word. I still hate your guts.”

“Likewise, you stupid prick.”

As Darien shook a line of Stygian salts onto the lid of the centre console, Malakai got out his bottle of Venom and dripped a couple drops into each eye. Darien shut a nostril and snorted the line through a rolled-up banknote, sinuses tingling as the black grains shot up into his skull.

When the Butcher had offered his assistance to Darien at the Doghouse, Darien had made the decision to take him up on that offer, using a room in the warehouse that housed the Chopping Block for any kills that were especially gruesome. He never wanted to be the reason Loren ran out on him again, never wanted to scare her away. And even though she wasn’t at Hell’s Gate right now, it was better to prepare for the moment when she *did* come back, especially because his week away from her was nearly up, thank the gods. No more blood would be spilt in the place they called home, not unless the situation absolutely called for it, and not unless there were no other options.

Aside from that, Gaven knew where their house was. And if anything went awry, or if any of his men had been assigned to watch their neighborhood, Darien wouldn't chance being seen.

The single warlock on the watch was who they would take. Hopefully his mind would be susceptible to their magic.

They wouldn't kill the guy; it would draw too much suspicion from Gaven. So they would need to get their answers from him and then wipe his memory of the night's events. Dump his ass out back of a bar, maybe. Make it seem like he got beat for talking smack while drunk.

As soon as the salts had burrowed deeply into his bloodstream, making him feel buoyant and overly alert, Darien swept the rest of the grains onto the floor of the car and took his phone out of the cupholder. He found Tanner on speed dial and hit CALL.

Tanner picked up instantly. "Hey."

"Ready?" Darien asked.

"Cameras are cleared. Spells are still on, so I hope you don't need to go inside the building."

"Not today. We'll come back when we're done and return the briefcase then." It was still at Hell's Gate. Arthur had come to the house to check out the aura magic trapped in the cylinders, bringing an assortment of equipment with him, mainly microscopes and books that were so old they were falling apart.

"All clear, then," Tanner said.

"Thanks, Tanner." He hung up and looked at Malakai. "Ready?"

Malakai opened his door, eyes like black pits. "Let's go."

They operated the same way as last time, Darien taking the men on one side of the building while Malakai took the other, disarming and knocking them unconscious before the men could get a look at their attackers. Creature flew overhead, chirping to them through the Spirit Bond to let them know where the rest of the guards were, since the spells on the building kept them from seeing through the walls.

As Darien disarmed the last hellseher with a blunt hit to the side of the head, Bandit's misty voice drifted into his thoughts. *Why does Creature get to help?*

Darien pushed the stray locks of hair out of his face. *Because he's smaller and less noticeable than you.*

*I don't like him anymore,* Bandit grumbled.

Darien met Malakai on the right side of the building as the warlock—their target—was making his rounds on the left.

"Let's go around back," Darien mouthed.

They moved quietly, hurrying to the back of the warehouse. Their footsteps were inaudible on the grass, their magic forming walls of quiet on all sides of them.

Creature fluttered over to perch on a security camera. *Three steps.*

Darien and Malakai waited side by side, so close to the corner of the building that the warlock would stand no chance of seeing them, no chance of turning and bolting when he came face to face with them.

The man rounded the corner...and skidded to a stop as he took in the Devil and the Reaper standing before him.

Malakai grinned. "Boo!"

And then Darien punched the guy in the face.

---

It was the perfect room to interrogate someone, especially for a last-minute decision that had stemmed from little planning or set-up. Casen had the strongest spells available coating the walls, ceiling, and floor, built to contain the screaming and hitting that would surely be heard by the people at the Block otherwise. It was only early afternoon, but the place was still filled with enough people to be a cause for concern.

The room was all concrete. There was a hard chair in the centre, where the hellseher sat, restrained and unconscious. A single lightbulb of mercury vapour swayed from a crumbling ceiling, bathing Darien and Malakai in jade.

Malakai stepped forward, reaching into the pocket of his leather jacket to take out a small glass capsule of smelling salts. He held it under the man's nose and cracked it open, ammonia and ethanol drifting up into the warlock's airways.

The odour caused the man to wake up with a jolt, head snapping back. Watery eyes blinked frantically as he took in the nondescript room.

And then those eyes widened when they focused on the two Darkslayers standing before him.

"What the hell is this shit?" The chair rattled as he tried to break free, the zip ties on his wrists cutting into his flesh. "Where am I?"

Darien stepped forward and placed his boot on the chair between the man's thighs, tipping it back so it teetered on its hind legs. "Relax," Darien whispered. "We'd like to ask you a few questions."

The veins in his neck were bulging. "I ain't talking. You'll never make me talk."

Darien reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of spiked brass knuckles. He slid them on and squeezed his fist, the gold spikes reflecting the acid-green of the mercury vapour. "Never?"

The hellseher's skin turned pallid. A sheen of sweat broke across his face, the smell of it permeating the air.

Darien lowered his chair back down with a bang that made the

man jump. "I don't see a need to use these if you cooperate," Darien said. "So why don't you make this easy on yourself and tell us what's in those silver briefcases you've been guarding so religiously?"

The warlock's eyes were overflowing with fear as they flickered between Darien and Malakai. "If I don't tell you, will you kill me?"

Darien and Malakai answered in unison. "Yes." Malakai added, "And then we'll bring your girlfriend in here and make her scrub your blood off the floors."

Fear coated the room, thick as smoke. The man's breathing quickened. "Are you *serious*?" he panted. The cold walls volleyed his words back with a sharp echo. "Where is she?"

The glance Malakai tossed Darien's way, and the slight tilt to his lips, told Darien the Reaper was amused by how easily the warlock had walked into that trap, revealing that he had a girlfriend he cared very deeply about. And while they would never take an innocent woman hostage, this warlock didn't know that.

"You'll see her," Malakai drawled. "As soon as you be a good man and answer our questions."

The warlock swayed in his seat. "If you touch her—"

Darien stepped closer, fingers tightening on the weapon. "I don't really think you're in the right position to be making threats right now."

"You're a couple of filthy murderers is all you are. How does it feel to have killed hundreds of people? Huh? How does it feel?!"

"We haven't killed in the hundreds, we've killed in the thousands," Darien hissed, voice thick with sick pride. But even as Darien said it, Loren's face flashed through his mind, and something deep inside him shrank away from the truth of his words. This moment wasn't something to be proud of, and neither was the statement he'd just made. And for one split second, he saw himself through the eyes of this man who was tied to the chair.

Monster. Demon. Killer. Exactly the things he was trying so desperately to get away from, in order to build something new.

But this was one of the many steps he would need to take to get to that new life—that perfect future glowing in the distance, always out of his reach.

He blinked the thoughts away and nodded at Malakai. "Hold him still. We'll start with a few hits to loosen up his tongue."

Malakai did so without delay. Darien stepped forward. Malakai held the guy by the shoulders as Darien wound back—

"Wait, wait!" the guy blubbered, head recoiling. "I never said I wouldn't talk!"

"And I never said I cared," Darien hissed. But he took off the weapon. The guy's aura was pulsing with a fear so strong, it told



Darien he was close to passing out, which was exactly what they didn't need right now. "We'll forget about this little toy for now," he said, slipping it into his pocket. "How does that sound?"

The man's reply was so loud, it shook the room. "WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?"

Darien struck with his bare fist, knuckles splitting the guy's eyebrow open. He struck again. And again. And again. And again. He blacked out as he hit the guy, losing himself to his dark side. He wasn't sure how many hits he'd dealt, but by the time he stopped, the guy was still conscious, so at least there was that. Blood was leaking from his nostrils, and his mouth was cut open, red staining his teeth.

"You going to tell me now?" Darien said quietly, shaking blood off his hand. "Or does my friend here need to break a few of your bones?"

Malakai reached for whatever weapon he would've used to get the job done, but he paused when the man started shouting.

"Wait, wait! I'll tell you, I'll tell you. The briefcases..."

"We're waiting," Malakai prompted with a threatening croon, his eyes swallowed up by black. The fragrance of blown-out candles swept through the room as he used his magic to place a claw on the guy's mind, urging him to speak.

"There's magic in them. Aura magic." He paused to swallow, blood dribbling down his chin. "Magic that's been drained from people."

Blue was right.

"What are they for?" Darien asked.

"They're weapons."

"For what?" Malakai said. "What do they do?"

"They kill demons."

"There are a lot of other weapons that kill demons." But even as Darien said it, his mind briefly went to that winged creature under the Strangler Fig—how difficult she had been to kill. "I smell bullshit." He wound his fist back—

"I'm not lying! I swear. They're weapons, but they...the magic—they're using the magic for something else too. Not just bullets but..."

Malakai gripped him tighter. "But what?" he snarled.

"They're using them," the man panted, wincing, "to open curtains."

"What does that mean?" Darien snarled. When the guy made no move to speak, Darien wound his fist back.

"Wait, wait, wait, don't, don't—"

Malakai barked, "Spit it out!"

"The Veil," he blubbered. "The veil between our world and the spirit realm. They're opening it—opening *all* of them."

There were many stories surrounding the Veil, most of them passed off these days as being no more than legend. Some people still accepted the stories as fact, but most had stopped believing in the

existence of the Veil a long time ago.

"What do you mean all of them?" Darien demanded. "There's more than one?"

The man was shaking. "Forgive me."

*"More than one?"* Darien thundered. "Answer me!"

But the man went limp, his face turning deep purple. His mouth was foaming, spit dribbling down his chin as his eyes went blank with death, blood swimming in the whites.

Poison.

"Fuck!" Darien bellowed, letting go of him with a shove.

"What the hell," Malakai muttered. "We checked his mouth—"

"Yeah, I know we checked his mouth, for gods' sake!" They'd done it back at the warehouse.

Darien kicked the chair, nearly tipping it over.

"Dare." Malakai's eyes were wide. "What's Gaven going to do when he finds out one of his men disappeared from watch and is now dead?"

Darien took his phone out of his pocket, not caring that he was getting blood all over the screen as he found Finn's number.

"Solace," Finn answered.

"I've been helping you out," Darien began, every word tense as he stared at the corpse slumped in the chair. "Now I need you to help me."

"What happened?"

Darien briefed Finn on what was happening, saving most of the details for when he saw him in person.

When he was finished, Finn swore. "You didn't check his mouth, Cassel? What are you, a newbie?"

"Don't fucking talk to me like that! Of course we checked it, but he must've swallowed it before I knocked him out at the warehouse!" There must've been a delay on the poison, something in his bloodstream that had kept it from reacting quick enough to off himself before he gave away intel. Some Blood Potions were known to do such a thing, which was likely what'd happened here, and something Gaven one hundred percent had not been made aware of before hiring the guy.

"Okay, okay!" Finn was saying. "How do you want me to fix this?"

"Frame someone. Pick one of the worst criminals from your database and make it look like they were behind this."

"Shit, Cassel—"

*"Do it, Finn!"* Darien barked. "Or I'm out."

He swore again. "Alright, I'll handle it. Where are you?"

"Can't tell you that." He wouldn't drag the Butcher into this mess, not when he was already wanted by the MPU and every other form of

law enforcement in the whole state of Witheredge. Casen was lucky he'd managed to evade them for this long, especially considering the location of the Umbra Forum was pretty widely known. Good luck didn't last forever. "Meet me at Lonely Beach at quarter past three. *Alone*. Or I am killing anyone you bring, *and* you."

---

Finn slammed the trunk shut, sealing the dead body inside it. He leaned against the car and crossed his beefy arms, teeth worrying his lower lip.

Only the two of them were here. Malakai had parted ways with Darien back at the Umbra Forum so he could take Jewels to her doctor's appointment. Malakai hadn't elaborated on her situation, and Darien hadn't asked. He'd gleaned enough from the look on Malakai's face to know his sister was losing her battle with the Tricking.

No one ever won against the Tricking.

Finn said, "This isn't exactly how I'd hoped to spend my day."

"You and me both."

"What did you learn from him?"

Darien filled him in on everything the guy had revealed in the short time before the poison had spread through his system.

When he was finished, he jerked his chin at Finn. "Anything new with you?"

"Way more than I'd like." His sigh was more like a growl. "More dead animals."

"Where?"

"More in Hooded Skullcap. Edgemoore. The neighborhoods up by Dark Creek." He paused. "And Ebonfield."

Darien's eyes flicked skyward as he pictured the city in his head, as if he were looking at a map. "Those are all near the Crossroads."

"Sure are." Finn nodded sharply. "It's not just dead animals either. People have been seeing doctors and Healers for some new illness that's making them severely fatigued. And when I looked into the medical records, I found that all these people—every single one—live in one of those areas in the city."

Fucking hell.

"What did the doctors say? Anything?"

"They're stumped. They've been sending the patients away with useless prescriptions meant for colds and flus. A few of those people have gone home only to wind up in emergency the next day, complaining that they can't breathe. Some of those people have been put on respirators."

Darien stared out at the choppy water sloshing against the end of

the dock. The area was quiet, not a single other person in sight. Gulls swarmed the afternoon sky. Their white bodies nested on buoys, a few of them picking through scraps of food and napkins in the sand of the Lonely Beach.

“You’ve got that look,” Finn said.

Darien blinked. “What look?”

“That look that says you have an idea.”

“More like a fear,” Darien sighed. “If what that warlock said is true, and there are people using aura magic to open the Veil, then I wonder if all this is linked. Maybe these animals are dying, and people are getting sick, because they’ve already started to lower the Veil.” According to legend, the Veil separated the land of the living from the realm of the dead. The two were not meant to mingle, and if they did, if the legends were true...

Finn’s brows shot up. “You actually believe all that?”

“You don’t?”

He shrugged. “I grew up thinking it was nothing but kooky legend.”

“So did I. But I’m not writing anything off.” Darien dug his keys out of his pocket and made for his car. “Call me if anything else happens.” He turned back around as he walked and pointed a finger at Finn’s trunk. “And make sure you take care of that. If this comes back to bite me in the ass, I’ll make your life a living hell.”

“I got it, Cassel.”

Darien got in his car and started the engine. He was about to put it in drive when his phone buzzed with an incoming message. He got it out of his pocket and checked the screen.

The contact name *Dickface Jacky* flashed across the screen. Darien unlocked the phone and read the message.

*Sup, Big Boy. You having a Surge?*

Darien typed a reply. *When am I ever not having a Surge?*

*Hahahah*, Jack wrote. And then: *Fifty Grimmachts nesting in Silver Claw. Coming?*

Yeah, why not.

*I’ll be right there*, he wrote back.

—

Werewolf Territory never failed to entertain.

Darien, Jack, Tanner, and Lace took down the last of the Grimmachts in the kitchen of Silver Claw. It was a nightclub in the Silverwood District with a head chef who, judging from the state of his kitchen, specialized in rancid meat and side dishes that looked like slop and smelled like milk that had been left out to curdle in the sun.

“On your left!” Darien barked as one of the small winged creatures—body like a bird, face like a vampire—dove for Tanner’s neck with a high-pitched screech, knocking the blade out of his hand.

Tanner swatted it out of midair with a—

Cast iron frying pan. It worked surprisingly well too.

It dropped to the floor, wings splaying. Tanner stomped its skull flat with the heel of his boot. Black blood squirted across the checkered tile.

“Cast iron.” Darien nodded in approval. “Nice, Atlas.”

Tanner cracked a smile.

Another Grimmnacht swept for the back of Tanner’s neck.

Lightning-fast, Darien grabbed it by the tail and whipped its body against the ground, the impact killing it instantly.

“What did I say about watching your back?” Darien barked to Tanner as Lace and Jack took down a dozen of the creatures with automatic weapons, kitchen staff watching from the perimeter of the long room. Blood misted the air, and bullets riddled the walls, drywall exploding.

“Sorry,” Tanner mumbled, cutting two down with the blade he retrieved from the grimy floor.

“You’ve been spending too much time on screens,” Darien accused, shouting over the crack of bullets. It was true; he often worried about taking Tanner on jobs that required anything other than a phone or a computer. The guy was just as capable at killing as he was hacking, but that didn’t mean a person couldn’t get rusty from lack of practice.

Jack grinned. “And not enough time on the battlefield.” He wiped the blood off his forehead with the back of his glove, wavy hair clinging to his skin.

They slaughtered the rest of the Grimmnachts in a matter of minutes, making even more of a mess of the kitchen that had seen better days.

And then they dumped the bodies out back with the piles of oozing trash bags.

Lace tugged off her gloves and stuffed them in the back pocket of her white jeans. White—bad choice of clothing, but sometimes her love of fashion won over her practicality. “I need a shower.” She shook the blood off her sleeve. “Those things are nasty.”

“Darien?” called a gravelly voice.

Darien turned, peering down the alley to see Valen and Sylvan walking by on the street. After confirming it was him, they started walking this way, garbage crunching under their boots.

“I thought that was you,” Sylvan said, words bouncing against the walls, the bricks colorful with graffiti.

Jack joked, “As if he’s not impossible to miss.”

“What are you guys doing here?” Darien asked.

Valen gestured to the club. "They have some of the best strippers in the city."

"You got a thing for werewolves?" Lace teased.

"We've got a thing for beautiful women," Sylvan replied with a wink, eyes raking down her body.

Lace snickered.

"What are you doing here?" Valen countered.

Darien gestured to the Grimmacht corpses piled on top of the trash bags. "Got a call about these buggers nesting in the kitchen."

Jack's perpetual grin grew. "Hope you guys don't indulge in anything off the menu."

"Only lap dances and the occasional beer," Valen said.

Tanner grimaced. "I wouldn't even drink the beer if I were you." As if he'd just remembered the glasses sitting on the top of his head, he put them back on. A second later he removed them and used the inside of his shirt to clean the specks of blood off the lenses.

Lace was grimacing too. "He's not exaggerating."

She'd barely got the last word out when glass smashed in the kitchen, followed by shouting and pounding feet.

Darien was at the door and pushing through it before anyone else had even moved.

He froze at the sight of the vampire—young, maybe twenty years at most, her copper hair cut short—dodging the werewolves pursuing her with kitchen knives.

Shouts cut through the room, voices mingling together.

"Get the fuck back here!"

"Stupid leech!"

Fear made the vampire's red eyes bulge out of her bone-white face, and although she was trying to escape, she was showing no sign of attacking, or even shifting into her hunting form.

It was the blatant fear written clear as day on her face that pushed Darien to react, his Devils following behind him as he crossed the kitchen, Valen and Sylvan there too. Hands drifted toward weapons as they waited for instruction.

Darien stepped in front of her before the head chef—Big was his nickname—could cut her head off with a meat cleaver.

"Fuck out of my way, Cassel," the wolf replied, blade glinting as he held it behind his head, the muscles in his massive shoulder rippling.

"Why don't you let me take care of her?" Darien suggested.

He tried to lunge, but Darien blocked his path.

"She's trespassing!" Big thundered.

A startled cry slipped out of the vampire as she literally cowered at Darien's back, hands in front of her face.

"Put the knife down, Big." Big was running out of chances, and

Darien's hands were twitching with a dark and unstoppable need.

Big lunged—

Darien grabbed a fistful of his shirt collar and slammed him against the counter, Big's sheer size making little difference under Darien's firm grip. Dishes and utensils clattered to the floor as Darien snarled in his face, "Put the blade down, Big, or I'll cut your throat open with it."

Silence swept through the room, broken up only by the few staff members who dared to continue cooking and cleaning, fires roaring on gas stoves, pots and pans clinking together where they hung from hooks on shelves and cupboards.

And then Big lowered the blade.

Darien released him with a shove. "I'll take her out of your hair," he said, stepping back.

Big lifted his chin. "You do that."

Darien called over his shoulder, "Send me payment by midnight or I'm coming back for your head." Fifty Grimmachts was a hefty bill.

Where he stood with the others, arms crossed, a big grin on his face, Jack said, "He ain't joking. He's been talking about wanting a hunting trophy above our fireplace for a while."

Darien jerked his chin at the vampire, who recoiled from the simple movement. "Let's go talk outside."

She didn't hesitate to follow him, though she was trembling from head to toe, teeth chattering.

When they got outside, Darien tried not to crowd her, but the others standing in a loose half-circle around him didn't help.

"Why did you come here?" Darien said, keeping his tone level and quiet. Even if she wasn't a part of one of the major vampire houses in Angelthene, it was uncommon for a vampire to come into Werewolf Territory without good reason, especially to a nightclub that barred a single vampire from crossing the threshold. When she didn't reply, Darien prompted, "Are you suicidal? What's the deal?"

"I was brought here," she stammered.

"You were brought here," he repeated. "By who?"

She showed him her wrists—chafed, as if by rope.

Jack murmured, "What the hell?"

"I was taken," the vampire said. Her throat bobbed. "The last thing I remember was having a drink with some friends at Her Infernal Majesty, and then I woke up in...in someone's car, I don't know whose."

"You part of a house?" When she didn't reply, Darien prompted Jack with a nod.

Jack stepped forward and grabbed her by the wrist, his other hand going to the pocket in his jacket.

The vampire jumped. "W-what are you doing?"

Jack pushed up her sleeve. Clicked on a small flashlight attached to his keys. The UV light passed over the inside of her wrist, revealing the torch symbol tattooed there.

He clicked it off. Looked at Darien. "Silver Torch."

Darien faced the girl. "The people who took you," he began. "Did they have tattoos?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see."

"Do you not remember anything?" he prodded.

Another shake of her head.

Even though recent events had proven his Sight not so reliable as he'd once believed, Darien blinked it into place and read her aura. There was no sign that she was being dishonest; even her body language told him she was telling the truth.

Darien inclined his head toward the street. "You're free to go. Make sure you fly, don't get in any cabs or buses."

She scampered away with her head down, arms crossed tight. She didn't look back.

The werewolf who stormed around the corner just then, shoulder-length dark hair blowing back in a breeze, made to go after her—

"Logan!" Darien barked.

He stopped mid-step. Whirled to face the alley. His chest heaved with anger as he took in the Devils and Reapers standing in a group.

Coming up behind Logan was Sebastian, the alpha's Second. Seb's wolf name was Cryo, and he was a member of the Guardian pack. A guy in his late twenties, his physique just as brawny as Logan's. Despite his young age, his shoulder-length hair was a deep silver, a trait some werewolves were born with.

They started heading this way. "What did you do?" Logan demanded, hands balling into fists at his sides.

"Relax, Logan." Darien stepped in his path. "Relax. She doesn't know anything."

His nostrils flared. "You have no right to let a Torch vamp walk off my property when she shouldn't have even been here to begin with."

"You know who she is?" Sylvan asked.

"Her name's Desiree Denaldi. One of the twins set to inherit the Silver Torch." He pointed a finger at Darien. "And you had no right, Cassel." That arm was trembling.

Lace tried to get between them. "Darien, step back."

Darien held up a hand. "It's fine." To Logan he said, "Cool it. She was brought here against her will. She had bruises all over her. The condition of her wrists told me she had been tied up."

"By who? Did she say?"

"She didn't know."



“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You want to hear my theory?”

Both Logan and Sebastian faced him with reluctance, the former’s arms still trembling with an impending shift.

“My theory is that the vampires are the ones who’ve been dumping dead bodies on *your*,” he jabbed him in the chest, “land.”

Logan thought it through, breaths puffing out through flared nostrils. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Is it? *Think*, Logan. The only dead people showing up in your territory are vampires, and they all look like they’ve been mauled to death by a werewolf.” The autopsies had confirmed it. “Why not a knife wound? A bullet wound? Why not one of those? Why claws?”

Sebastian said, “What do they want? What would be the point?”

“That, I don’t know,” Darien replied. He started down the alley, Lace, Jack, and Tanner following behind him. A wind swept through the neighborhood. He was struck with the humid waft of wet garbage and fish guts. “But I’m out for the night, I’m beat.” It was only the afternoon, but he was exhausted. He gestured to the club. “And for the gods’ sakes, order a health inspection on this place, will you?”

“It’s not my club,” Logan said tightly.

“No, but it *is* on your land. The place is a pigsty, and I don’t feel like dealing with any new mutations.” Demon mutations were a pain in the ass, and grubby places like the kitchen of Silver Claw usually had a hand in creating them.

But unlike the new demons he’d encountered lately, mutations were easy to spot. For one, they had auras. Two, their features were always a cross between two already-existing species that were a cinch to pinpoint.

When he reached the end of the alley, the others walking on either side of him, he turned to face Logan. The wolf was deep in thought, staring off into the distance with fire-painted eyes.

“Get that health inspection, or I won’t be coming back here when Silver Claw’s mystery meat spawns a new evil.” He turned the corner, heading off down the street, and called over his shoulder, “And give my theory some thought.”

“Later, Darien,” Sylvan called.

“Enjoy your lap dances,” Darien called back.

“Oh, we plan to.”

Loren sighed. “Look, I know you’re scared that something is going to go wrong, but you *need* to let me try it. We’re getting nowhere.”

Agatha was sitting across from her in their usual training room in the school for botany. Loren’s suggestion had the hedgewitch casting a furtive glance at the bottle of eyedrops. The Venom sat near the edge of the table, looking fairly harmless, all things considered.

Loren tipped up a brow. “Well?”

A sigh slipped through Agatha’s lips. She leaned forward, folding her arms on the table. For a minute, she fiddled with the long sleeves of her dress—purple today—and then she pinned Loren with a serious look. “And what am I supposed to tell Darien if you overdose or—worse—die?” Loren didn’t have an answer to that.

She shifted in her seat. “I won’t.”

“How do you know? I don’t really like the sound of this, Loren—”

“Agatha, please, I am begging you. I just want to understand my magic, okay?” She was met again with silence. Silence, and apprehension...and likely some lingering disbelief that she had magic at all. Loren didn’t blame her; after all, a human having magic was unheard of. It was a miracle Agatha was still willing to do these lessons with her.

Agatha sighed. “If anything even remotely dangerous happens—”

“Then you can call him, you can call an ambulance, you can call law enforcement and rat me out for buying drugs.” She grabbed the bottle that weighed more than it looked. “I give you permission to do whatever you need to. Just let me try this.” She twisted off the cap and eyed the tip that was blackened with Venom. The tarlike smell was so strong, it instantly permeated the room and made the plants by the windows rustle their leaves in disgust.

“Loren...,” Agatha tried.

But Loren tipped her head back and dripped one drop into each eye.

The research she’d done on the drug had been correct in saying that it stung on impact. Her eyes instantly watered, and her surroundings blurred together until she could no longer distinguish between Agatha and anything else in the room. She closed her eyes, the floor beneath her feet spinning and spinning and spinning...

The clock on the wall indicated the passing of two minutes with a heavy ticking that filled the silence. When those two minutes were up,

and her eyes had stopped burning, the floor beneath her feet motionless, Loren opened her eyes.

Agatha jolted back in her chair, nearly tipping it over. She grabbed onto the ledge of the table, steadying herself, but she continued to gape at Loren, her mouth hanging open. "Holy Star."

Loren blinked. "What?"

"Your eyes." Agatha's throat bobbed. "Your eyes, they are...they are solid white." She got up and walked over to a desk at the far side of the room, the hem of her dress swishing on the floor. She rummaged around in the drawers, the contents knocking together noisily, until she found a small hand mirror. She hurried back over. Loren took the mirror from her and looked at her reflection.

Agatha hadn't lied. Her eyes were solid white, and there were white lines webbing away from her eyes, ending just shy of her cheekbones and the hairline near her temples.

"Can you see okay?" Agatha sat back down in her chair.

"I can see fine." Nothing looked different. "What do Venom users usually look like?"

"Like you, except with black eyes and black webbing."

Loren didn't know what to think of that, but she set aside the mirror and looked at Agatha, who appeared more than a little terrified. "Let's try this again."

Agatha drew a deep breath. "Alright. Take your conduit. Cup it tightly. Close your eyes and concentrate."

Loren followed her instructions. She focused as hard as she could, willing her magic to show itself. But nothing felt different, and as the seconds ticked by, she began to grow frustrated.

With her eyes still shut, she asked Agatha, "Are there any further instructions you can give me? I can't feel anything."

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask you something," Agatha began. There was something off in her tone, something that made Loren nearly open her eyes, but she resisted. "How did you end up dating Darien, anyway?" The random question made Loren's forehead crease.

"It's a long story," she answered carefully.

"You seem to really like him," Agatha went on. "I don't blame you—he's one of the most attractive men I've ever seen."

Loren forced herself to draw a deep breath, but her hands curled around the conduit, her grip on it tightening until she could feel the sharp metal poking into her palms.

Agatha continued, "I think it's the black hair and blue eyes—such a stunning combination. But also that face..." A low whistle slipped through her lips. "When he came to see me for help with his Surges—which is how we met, you know—I actually wound up crushing on him. I hope that doesn't bother you. I had a crush on him for years—"

"If you don't stop talking," Loren began in a lethally controlled voice, "I'm going to pull out your hair. And something tells me you wouldn't suit being bald." One minute of silence passed before Loren opened her eyes.

Agatha was watching her, humor quirking her mouth. "I was hoping that would've worked."

"Making me jealous?" Loren didn't bother asking Agatha if any of the things she'd said were true. It was probably better if she didn't know. Besides, Loren couldn't blame her if what she'd said was the truth.

Agatha shrugged. "Jealous. Upset. Call it what you will." She shrugged again. "It was worth a shot."

"You didn't see anything?" Loren pressed, gesturing to the conduit, still lightless and cold in her hands. But she could feel something nudging at her from the inside, a feeling she thought stemmed from the Venom.

Agatha shook her head. "Let's try something else. Even with the assistance of a drug, you need to know how to summon your magic, so bear with me here. You clearly have strong feelings for Darien. Would you say that you...love him?"

"Yes," Loren answered, the word floating from her tongue before Agatha had finished speaking. "Yes, I do."

"I want you to think about all the things that you love about him. Can you do that? Pretend I am not here."

"Okay."

"Don't say them out loud. Just think them. Feel them."

Still cupping the amulet in front of her heart, Loren closed her eyes.

She loved so many things about Darien that she wasn't sure where to start. But she decided she would start at the beginning and see where it led her. Her mind spiraled back to last year, back to the moment when he'd found her in the alley between The Salted Caramel Ice Cream Parlour and Medea's Magic Tricks. And she remembered...

The look on his face when he'd seen her that very first time. When he'd realized she was human, but had looked at her like she was anything but. Fear had kept her from seeing it back then, but she knew him well enough now, so well that hindsight had shed light on the things she'd missed before. He'd looked at her like she was extraordinary and beautiful, and made of all the things she knew she wasn't.

She thought of how he'd stared at her in Rook and Redding's, as if he couldn't look away from her. Back then, she'd found his stare frightening, no matter how handsome he was, and she remembered nearly choking on the butterflies he'd stirred up in her stomach, so

many of them that it felt like her insides would burst open with wings.

How he'd paid for her food after, handing his card over to the server before she could fumble her wallet out of her bag.

How he'd stopped her from tripping on the stairs at Hell's Gate, holding onto her for longer than he'd needed to, as if he didn't want to let her go.

The way he always sat facing her, no matter where he was in a room, and how he stayed as close to her as possible, angling his body toward her. And whenever he sat directly beside her, he framed her with his legs spread, a possessive hand on the back of her chair. Always guarding her. Forever her protector.

How he cooked for her whenever she was hungry, and how he always noticed her tattoo flaring with warning before she even noticed it herself.

The way he clung to her when they slept together at night, never letting go, his strong arms wrapped around her body. How he liked to listen to her heart beating as he fell asleep, as if the sound of it was his personal lullaby, his cheek on her breast.

And how every time they kissed, he kissed her as if it was the very last time he'd be able to it. And how, whenever he said goodbye to her, whether it was for school, work, or anything in between, he kept watching her until the moment she was out of his sight.

And...and she remembered the ring. When he'd put the ring on her finger on the Control Tower. Saving her life, knowing full well that in doing so, he was forfeiting his own.

Loren opened her eyes.

The solar amulet was glowing with the many shades of her aura. It warmed her hands, a bright white tinged with rainbow, the colors sparkling across her skin.

Agatha smiled at her. "Love works its own magic."

Loren smiled back. When she looked at her magic, her smile spread wider, a spark of hope in her chest. "Love works its own magic."

—

There were few things Max was willing to call cute, especially when it wasn't pertaining to women, but Arthur's house in Lambsquarters was pretty damn cute.

He was seated across from the old man at the table in his tiny kitchen, Blue, Dominic, Dallas, and Lace occupying the other chairs. Jack was here too, but instead of joining them at the table, he stood near the fireplace, studying the collection of antiques and unique trinkets on the mantle. The ornaments had belonged to Arthur's wife Irene—and all of them were breakable, a fact that should keep

someone like Jack the hell away from them. But sometimes Jack had the curiosity of a two-year-old—and the self-control of one too.

Blue was demonstrating her water magic for the group. At least, she was trying to. She sat in her chair, hands between her knees, a look of concentration on her face. Cobalt blush dusted her cheeks.

After another moment, her eyes turned electric. Slowly, she brought up her right hand and rotated her index finger in a cyclonic pattern.

Water appeared out of thin air. A ribbon of it wrapped around her finger, spiraling up several feet. A briny breeze coated the room—

A commotion came from the living room. Jack had nearly dropped a small porcelain house, catching it right before it could smash.

“Jack,” Arthur called in a tired voice.

Jack placed the house back on the mantle. Gave Arthur a sheepish grin that showed all his straight white teeth. “It’s fine,” Jack said, waving his hand dismissively.

“That’s the second time you’ve said that this afternoon,” Arthur replied flatly, “and I fear the third won’t be fine.”

Dominic snickered. “Want me to put up a baby gate?”

Max muttered, “He needs one.”

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” Arthur said. He raised his voice and added, “As long as Mister Steele sits *down*.”

Jack, who had been reaching for another ornament, froze.

“Jack!” Lace hissed.

“Now I remember why we leave him at home unless Ivy’s here,” Max said, returning his attention to Blue, who was still focusing on keeping the water spiraling through the air, finger continuously rotating.

Jack came to the table just as she slumped in her chair with exhaustion, her magic disappearing into tiny droplets of rain that splattered her knees.

Dominic leaned across the table in concern, a hand that was tattooed in white ink reaching for Blue. “That’s the second time she’s done that in two days.”

“I’m fine,” Blue insisted. But she was panting.

Arthur gestured to the notebook spread before him, his recent research scrawled across the pages in loopy handwriting. “According to what I’ve found in the many books in Witchlight, Blue’s magic comes from the Mist.” He jabbed a finger into the torn Master Scroll—the half they possessed. “I also decided to return to our old friend here,” he said, poking the scroll again, “after Darien filled me in on where he’s going tonight.”

Parchment crinkled as Arthur smoothed it down and read aloud from the riddle.

*"I am heaven and earth,  
Body and spirit.  
The rainbow,  
the blood of the soul.  
The fiery and burning water."*

Arthur cleared his throat. "Now, I could be wrong. But something tells me the aura magic Darien found in Gaven's warehouse is connected to the Arcanum Well. This Master Scroll mentions the rainbow. And we all know the Well can only be used by the blood of Erasmus Sophronia."

When Dallas glanced at Max, there was fear in her eyes. "Loren," she whispered.

Max nodded.

"Right," Arthur said. "And what color is Loren's aura?" he prompted.

"White," Max answered. "Or rainbow."

"Right again. So the Well can be used only by someone who possesses a full spectrum of magic, someone whose colors are all equally as bright, which—the hellsehers in the room already know this—is incredibly rare."

He wasn't wrong. While a small number of the world population fell under the rainbow aura category, their colors were usually diluted, and one was always, *always* brighter than the others. These were the people who usually entered careers in the field of healing, their rare auras allowing them to have a positive—if only temporary—effect on people with the Tricking.

Arthur added, "The scroll refers to this person as the Rainbow Phoenix, or Skeleton Key. I haven't quite figured out why they call this person a Skeleton Key, but I don't believe I need to explain to any of you why they would refer to this person as the Rainbow Phoenix." A person possessing a full spectrum of magic, all colors equally bright, with the ability to operate the life-granting machine known as the Arcanum Well.

Dominic sat up straight. "Well I'll be damned." Everyone looked at him in question. "Blue was brought to Angelthene by people who were looking for—"

"A colored bird," Max and Dallas finished in unison.

"Rainbow phoenix," Lace said, looking impressed.

Dominic lifted his chin, a proud smile spreading across his face. "And you all mocked me."

"Sorry, Dom," Dallas mumbled.

"Wow," Dominic crooned. He gave a low whistle. "Did Dallas

Bright really just apologize?”

She merely rolled her eyes.

Arthur rolled up the Master Scroll, paper crackling. “It’ll be interesting to see what the other half says.”

Yes, indeed.



“Wait,” Loren said, sitting up straighter where she sat at a long oak table in the library of Angelthene Academy for Magic.

She was wholly exhausted from her afternoon practicing to summon her magic with Agatha, but when she’d returned from school she’d immediately come here to try to find any information on the Spirit Realm—anything that might help her get into it without the Terran Imperator there, watching her every step. Dallas and Sabrina were sitting across from her, looking proud of themselves for having discovered everything they’d just told her.

“You’re telling me that Blue’s aura is blue,” Loren said slowly, “and she has Blue Magic?”

Sabrina and Dallas nodded.

It was Sabrina who said, “Technically, it’s the magic of the Mist.” She leaned in close, her lustrous hair swinging to frame her face. “Arthur said it’s a form of Arcane Magic that vanished a long time ago. The term was used to describe hellsehers that possessed water magic. They could summon the element out of thin air.”

Loren added dubiously, “Which somehow explains why her fingernails and hair are blue?”

They nodded again.

Loren raised her eyebrows. “Okay then.”

“Look,” Sabrina began. “I know this all sounds crazy, but it makes sense. We’re learning new things about her every day, and with Arthur’s help, we should be able to find out where she came from and what the men she was with wanted her for.”

Dallas added, “Dom said she told him she came from a facility. She said she was an experiment. But as soon as she said it, she closed herself off. Doesn’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Loren’s lower lip jutted out in thought. “Still no indication of what colored bird she was talking about?”

Dallas shared a glance with Sabrina. “We think Dom mistranslated a bit,” Dallas said, her tone reluctant. “We think Blue meant to say *Rainbow Phoenix*.”

*Rainbow Phoenix.*

The floor rotated beneath Loren’s feet as she remembered back to her time in the Chalk Door.

*Rainbow Phoenix, Rainbow Phoenix, I can smell you.*

Dallas swore. She was looking at her watch. "We're late."

Sabrina paled. "Crap! I've never been late for a class. Hurry, Dallas! We need to hurry."

Loren had never seen anyone gather up their books as quickly as Sabrina and Dallas did then. Sabrina hurried off with a quick goodbye and a kiss blown over her shoulder.

Dallas, on the other hand, lingered. Sabrina kept running, not having realized Dallas wasn't behind her. "What class do you have?"

"None," Loren said. "I'm just going to get some extra studying in. Catch you later?"

"Sure," Dallas said.

Loren returned to her books, but when Dallas still lingered, she glanced up, brow furrowing. "What's wrong?"

Dallas shrugged. "Nothing, I just... Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Still not talking to Darien?"

Loren shrugged.

"The dance is coming up." Loren had nearly forgotten all about it. "Is your dress finished being altered?"

She chewed her lip. "Just about." In fact, she'd received a voicemail yesterday. She was already late picking it up. But she told Dallas, "I should be able to pick it up next week."

"Will you even have a date now?" The question was an arrow piercing through Loren's heart. The chances of a couple Darkslayers being approved to attend a dance at Angelthene Academy were extremely slim, but Loren and Dallas had both vowed to try. The moment they'd seen the posters taped to the lockers and hallways throughout the school, they'd declared they would go down fighting trying to get Max and Darien to be allowed to be their dates. Of course, that was before the emperor had shown up and wrecked everything...

Loren forced herself to smile at Dallas. "Hope so," she replied.

Dallas didn't look convinced. "Yeah, I bet Darien hopes so too." She drew a deep breath in through her nose, chest rising. "Be careful, will you?" Dallas choked out the question, always too proud to show much emotion, particularly concern. When she spoke again, she looked away, eyes roving the library. "Especially now that Darien's not around. Arthur thinks all this stuff about aura magic is connected to the Arcanum Well, and if he's right, that means it would also connect..." Dallas's mouth twisted with a grimace.

To her. It would connect to her.

Too bad she was already neck-deep in trouble and unable to tell anyone about it.

"Don't worry," Loren said. "I'll be okay."

Dallas gave her a half-hearted smile. "Catch you later."

"See you."

Loren did manage to get quite a bit of reading done, thanks to how quiet the library was. But when thirty minutes passed, she found herself distracted by the voices of three girls who came into the library. The trio of witches sat down at one of the tables not far from hers and began clucking in a volume too loud to be considered library friendly.

Loren suppressed a sigh. She tried to focus on the grimoire spread open before her, but it was hard.

"I saw him outside the gates a couple weeks ago," the dark-haired one was saying. "It made me wonder if he's dating someone who goes here."

One of the other girls giggled. "Pretty sure Darien Cassel wouldn't date a university student. Or any of the Devils, for that matter."

"Maybe he was here to off someone," one of them hissed with a giggle, pressing her hand to her mouth. Loren tried her best to ignore them; their conversation was none of her business. But she caught herself occasionally glancing at their table.

It became nearly impossible to ignore them when the dark-haired one began jabbering on about how hot he was.

Shaking her head, Loren returned to her book, tapping her pencil against the page. The girl kept talking, and when she wasn't talking, she was sucking on her frozen coffee. The slurping of the beverage moving up the straw was unbearably loud.

Loren's temples throbbed. She gripped the pencil tighter, nearly snapping it. Her whole body was hot, as if she'd been standing out in the sun. When was the last time she'd eaten?

The girl kept droning on and on. "I'm just saying, if *I* was the one who was dating him—"

The pencil snapped in two in Loren's hand. Her brain felt like it was expanding, a balloon filled up with too much air. Warmth flared through her chest, and it spread all the way down to her navel—

A shriek pierced the air, followed by a collective gasp and laughter.

"Ewwwwwwwwww!" someone squealed.

Loren's conduit was suddenly flaming hot.

She plunged a hand down the front of her shirt and pulled it away from her skin, tugging it up through the collar of her blouse. She let go of it as soon as she was able, letting it fall against her chest. Pain bloomed across her skin, and she drew a hiss in through her teeth, rubbing the tender spot through her blouse.

Now that the conduit was no longer trying to burn a hole in her body, she looked up to see what the commotion was all about.

The table the three witches were at was covered in frozen coffee; it

was splattered all over their books and bags. The other two were still giggling as the brunette attempted to wipe the coffee off the front of her blouse. It looked like her drink hadn't just spilled—the cup had exploded.

Loren stared, mind spinning.

What in the name of Ignis?...

She grabbed her conduit and felt the metal. It was no longer scalding, but it was still warm to the touch. Had *she* done that?

Loren glanced around the library. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary, nothing that might point to how the girl's cup had exploded.

Except the clock hanging on the wall appeared to have stopped working. She checked the time on her phone, comparing it to the clock...

The hands had stopped moving approximately two minutes ago.

Loren stood. Feigning interest in the shelves of books, she walked around the area, looking for anything else that might be out of place. There was nothing else that she could see, no items or people frozen in time, though there was a shift in the air—a different temperature near her table, several degrees cooler than the rest of the library.

Loren shook the thoughts out of her head and returned to her table.

As she was gathering up her books, a figure in her peripheral vision caught her attention.

Klay was watching from several tables over. She wasn't sure when he had got here, but something about the way he was looking at her made her wonder if he'd been there the whole time. And if he had, that meant he'd seen everything.

She was running out of time. And now that Klay had seen her using her magic, the emperor would be coming for her—and soon.

Darien never imagined he would be back here so soon.

He stood on the sidewalk in front of Blackgate Manor, Bandit at his side. One of the charms he wore around his neck was resting between his teeth; he lightly chewed on it as he stared at the grimy windows and peaked roof. The sign rattled in a warm breeze. Aside from the distant beeping of car horns, it was the only sound in the area. The old house was exactly the same as the last time he'd seen it; it never changed. It would be here forever, until the planet was nothing but dust.

Down the street, a woman and her canine Familiar approached, their footsteps becoming audible the closer they got, bringing a flicker of life to this dead place. She was tossing a murkball—a shadowy toy a Familiar could materialize out of thin air—for the hound, and he used his nose to bounce it back into her waiting hand. When the woman spotted Darien and Bandit, she crossed the street with her Familiar and continued their walk on the other side.

Bandit looked up at him, black nose twitching. *Why don't we ever do that?* His glowing eyes narrowed into slits.

*Do what? Play fetch?*

*Yeah.*

*You? Play fetch?* Darien smiled around the charm, the taste of metal spreading across his tongue.

Bandit looked wounded. *Why not?*

Darien shook his head. *That'd be the day.*

He stared at the house again. A gust of wind howled down the street, the force of it stirring his hair. It carried a flurry of crisp leaves and tree branches that scraped across the pavement like nails on a chalkboard.

*I don't know why we're here if you're just going to keep staring at the house,* Bandit said. *Daylight's running out.* They looked in unison at the sun, the red orb dipping swiftly toward a shadowy skyline. *Someone's going to call the cops on you for casing the neighborhood.*

*I'm not stealing from anyone who matters.*

*You're scared, aren't you?*

*No.*

*Lies.*

*I'm not.*

*Lies, lies, lies.*

Darien sighed, letting the necklace fall out of his mouth. *Fine.* He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. *Let's go, tough dog.*

He walked across the lawn, Bandit trotting at his side. Dry grass crunched beneath boots and paws. Darien forced his legs to keep moving as he walked up the front steps, the old porch echoing hollowly.

Although he'd felt apprehensive seconds ago, there was no fear in his heart as he pushed open the screen door, the squeak of the hinges traveling far. He'd been here plenty of times; the demon knew him as well as any friend. He'd lived to tell of his time in this place, and he would live to tell of it again. As long as he didn't allow himself to feel afraid, there was nothing to fear.

Blinking his Sight into his vision, he stepped inside. Bandit was just as alert as Darien, ears twitching, paws entirely silent on the floor.

Darien knew exactly where to go. All the victims were killed in the same room, and their belongings remained there forever after the creature was finished consuming them. There would be a lot to sift through, but if he moved quickly it wouldn't take too long. After what'd happened at the Chopping Block, the warlock poisoning himself before he could give them any further information, this was his best and least risky option for finding answers.

In the dark, wide open room, there was a peculiar feeling of emptiness, almost like the monster wasn't here. Darien decided it was best not to think about it as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small flashlight. He clicked it on and eased himself into a crouch among the belongings of dead people, using his hand to dull the light. Monsters of all kinds hated light and heat. The beam glowed through his fingers like a fiery sunset.

The three hours that passed felt more like a thousand, but then, finally, Darien found the lost half of the Dominus Volumen. He had been banking on the chance that Randal was carrying it on his person the day he'd walked in here, and Darien was pleased to see that he was right. This should help the others gather more information on not just aura magic, but also the Veil.

He was about to stand when a familiar sight caught his eye. He shuffled closer, nudging an old book out of the way, and picked up a fine golden chain from where it was resting under an article of clothing, part of the chain draping into a crack between floorboards. Attached to the chain was a wedding ring.

Darien's eyelids slipped shut. His heart gave a thud that hurt like a knife wound. It took him several minutes before he could look at the ring again, several minutes before he could breathe without feeling like he was choking.

*Bandit, Darien said down his Spirit Bond. Bandit, it's Mom's ring.*

Although his parents' marriage had ended badly, his mother had picked this ring out herself from the Jewelry District. It was her style, chosen by a young woman who'd fallen hopelessly in love and had carried her excitement for the future as carefully as she'd carried the diamond on her finger. Darien had wanted this ring since the moment his mother died, but Randal had told him he'd sold it. All these years, and Darien hadn't a clue that his father had worn it around his neck. All these years, and the ring had been hiding in plain sight.

Darien kissed the diamond before putting it deep in the pocket of his leather jacket, along with the scroll. He zipped that pocket shut—

CLANG! *Clatter.*

Darien spun around, the golden beam from the flashlight bouncing. That was when he realized Bandit was no longer beside him.

*Bandit?* Darien called. Slowly, he rose to his feet. That feeling of emptiness was gone, the air heavy with an eerie presence.

Something was watching.

*Bandit*, he said again.

He took a step, trying his damn best not to make any excess noise, as he looked for his Familiar. He used his Sight, eager to get out of here, and saw Bandit lying flat on his belly under a tattered couch near the wall. He was trembling so hard, Darien could see it from this far away.

A sick feeling twisted in Darien's stomach. Whenever Bandit reacted this way, he had a damn good reason for doing so.

It felt like it took a million years to get across the room to the couch. He ignored the feeling of eyes tracking his every step as he walked, and when he reached the piece of furniture that was dark with mold, he put the flashlight in his pocket and lowered himself to the floor, stooping his head low so he could see Bandit.

Eyes glowed from under the couch, but the Familiar didn't move. In fact, he inched back.

*Bandit*, Darien said, biting his tongue before he could make the mistake of saying it out loud. He waved a hand. *Let's go.*

Bandit's ears flattened to his head. He shrank farther back, his eyes flicking to something over Darien's shoulder.

Darien's blood turned to ice. He was frozen in place, and he knew in that moment that the creature looming behind him was not the one he'd met last time, not the demon who'd killed Randal and his men.

There was a shift in the air. A shadowy claw reaching for his back.

Darien mouthed, "Don't move."

But Bandit whined, low and soft.

Darien's eyelids slid shut. *Shit.*

He was airborne before he realized what was happening. He couldn't see a thing, but whatever was in here was holding him aloft

ten feet in the air. He was lifeless as a doll, limbs stiff and immobile. He couldn't think, couldn't call upon his magic. Four of the five senses had left his body, so he could do nothing but watch.

And he understood that this was how the creature fed.



Loren jolted awake in her dorm room in the House of Salt, a scream hovering on her lips. She managed to tamp it down into a soft gasp as her vision wheeled about.

She gathered her bearings slowly, taking them in object by object, sound by sound, feeling by feeling. It was a method she used to ground herself in reality after a nightmare or a panic attack grabbed hold of her.

Sabrine and Dallas were sound asleep in their beds next to hers, blankets piled on top of them. The room was shrouded in darkness, save the trickle of moonlight filtering in through the arched windows lining the north wall. Aside from Dallas and Sabine's breathing, there wasn't a sound to be heard but the ticking of the clock on the nightstand. The hands indicated that it was only ten p.m.

She had no idea what had scared her out of a dead sleep, but her body was sticky with sweat, her pajama shorts and top clinging to her skin. The solar-shaped amulet was so hot, it was burning her chest.

Blinking sleep from her eyes, she reached under her shirt collar. As she tugged the amulet up, she saw that it was glowing white.

Dallas mumbled sleepily, stirring in her bed as light bounced about the room. Blankets rustled. The witch slurred Max's name before falling back asleep.

Loren held the amulet in a tight fist to stifle the glow. It flared brighter, shining defiantly through the gaps between her fingers. It drove away the shadows in the farthest corners of the room and bounced off the mirror near the window in icy fingers.

That was when she felt it—a tug in her chest, as if someone had tied a

rope around her heart and was attempting to drag her someplace else.

She looked toward the closed door, where the thread seemed to be pulling her to.

Quietly, she got out of bed and slipped her bare feet into her sneakers, not bothering to put on socks. On the way out, she plucked her academy cardigan off the hook on the door and shoved her arms through the sleeves.

Walking on tiptoes, she cracked open the door and made her way through the House of Salt, past dozens of other rooms. The

floorboards squeaked with every step, the sound traveling far. She stopped every few minutes, listening for any indication that a student had woken up.

When she made it to the entrance—the enchanted mirror that spanned an entire wall—she froze, staring down her reflection in the spotless glass.

If she were to get caught outside the House of Salt this late at night, she would be in serious trouble. And with the new headmaster now in charge of the building, her actions might even be inexcusable.

But her solar pendant was still glowing, still hot as a small sun in her grip. The feeling in her chest—the draw toward something or someone in this school—hadn't lessened in the past few minutes. Instead, it had grown stronger, as if it knew she was listening and was telling her to keep going, to not give up. It was the same feeling she'd experienced upon waking up in the rubble of her city, after the Well replica had leveled every structure and killed every person. The day she had been so desperate to bring Darien back to life that she'd screamed for help—for the real Arcanum Well to come out of hiding and work a miracle.

She wasn't about to ignore this feeling, not when it was finally making an appearance that was lasting longer than a few seconds.

So, she stepped forward, hand outstretched toward the mirror. The amulet flared brighter, reflecting like a tiny sun. Her fingers sank into the cold glass, the feeling like water rippling over her skin.

Before she knew it, she was standing in the firelit corridor, the mirror now behind her. The magic sealed the entrance shut with her departure, glass solidifying.

She started walking, following that invisible thread. Every time she second-guessed her actions and began to head back to the House of Salt, the solar pendant dulled, its temperature cooling.

Even though she was worried about being caught out of her dorm so late, she never did turn back. No matter how hard her thoughts and emotions warred with each other, no matter how many times her legs froze in place with uncertainty, she carried on.

No one else was out at this hour, so she was quick to cover distance. Within a matter of minutes, she found herself standing in the doorway of the academy swimming pool, nothing and no one for company but the shadows playing on the walls and ceiling. The place was eerily quiet at this time of night, the exact opposite of the noise and excitement that filled this place during the day.

Loren studied the room. The water in the pool was sloshing against the sides, as if someone had just climbed out of it. There were puddles on the tiles, and three pairs of sandals were lying under a bench by the wall.

Someone else was in here. She either had to leave now or find someplace to hide.

She was about to retreat when she heard the rumbling echo of male voices and bare feet thudding on wet floors. The echoing made it difficult to distinguish where they were coming from, and before she knew it, she was out of time—and staring down the source of the voices.

Three males walked out of the locker room wearing only pants, white towels slung around their necks.

Ethan, Chad, and Garrett—or, as Loren liked to call them, Shithead, Numb-nuts, and Pig-nose—slowed when they saw her, the conversation they were having fading into surprised silence.

These boys had made her life a living hell all year, kicking her chair and throwing balls of paper at her head every chance they got. She'd made a promise to herself that she would never get caught anywhere alone with them, but now...

It took them one second—just one, and then their mouths stretched into identical, sharklike smiles. They looked her over, eyes raking like hot coals over her pajamas and cardigan, the latter hanging open over her torso. They moved quickly, fencing her in with their half-naked bodies before she could move so much as one step.

“What do we have here?” Ethan began, pressing his body in close to her front while Chad came in from the back. Her gut turned into a tornado of nausea. She worked at building up a scream, but there was no oxygen in her lungs, and her tongue felt inert. “What’s a mouse like you doing out of her cage so late?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” she managed to say. Every word was tense, her throat drier than a desert. Memories of the Meatpacking District and the men outside the Pit flooded her mind, causing her muscles to lock up, just as they had back then.

Chad’s hand caressed her hair at the back of her head. She recoiled, bumping her cheek into Ethan’s bare chest. The moisture on his skin left an icky feeling on hers.

“She’s pretty,” Chad drawled. “Isn’t she, boys?”

She pushed away from Ethan’s chest, only to come face to face with Garrett this time. They were so close, she could feel the heat coming off their bodies, could smell the chlorine on their damp skin.

Knowing she had to buy herself time to think of something, she started talking. “I didn’t know it was customary to throw things at the girls you think are pretty.” She managed to make her voice sound beguiling—and kept the fear out of it. “Couldn’t you have tried something else, like, I don’t know...asking for my number?”

Ethan gave her a suggestive smile. “You know we’re just teasing, halfie.” He bit his lip and looked her over, his face only inches from

hers. "Truth is, I like you." She didn't know Ethan at all, but something about the way he said it suggested it wasn't a lie.

"I'm flattered." She did her best to look him over provocatively, just as he was doing to her. It probably wasn't convincing, but stalling was her best option right now. And maybe...maybe if she could turn the tables on them, she would make it out of this unscathed. A small, panicked voice in the back of her mind told her the odds—and they weren't good. Still, she continued, "Why don't we go out sometime? Just you and me." She would pick a time and place and would get Darien to meet this jerk and tear that smile into a bloody frown.

"I have a better idea." Ethan threw his towel to the floor and unclasped his belt buckle.

Loren's stomach turned over itself, every trace of calm on her face evaporating. All the blood in her head went down to her toes, and she swayed where she stood, the tattoo on her forearm burning red. The amulet, on the other hand, had gone dark and cold.

Ethan concluded, "We can have that date right now." It was to his friends that he said, "Get her on her knees."

As soon as Garrett and Chad reached for her, she struck, driving her fist into the former's nose and her elbow into Chad's groin, moving just like Darien had taught her. Blood sprayed from Garrett's nostrils, coloring the white towels with a smattering of red. Shouting filled the room, followed by hollow echoes and the slap of bare feet on tile as they dove for her.

She spun on a heel and fled, moving as fast as she could. As she neared the door, her amulet emitted light again.

But a pair of hard arms closed roughly around her waist, tugging her back, causing the amulet to dim again. Whoever was holding her picked her up off the ground. Loren's legs kicked in the open air. The walls threw back the echoes of her yelp as she launched herself forward, using all her weight to propel her feet back to the floor.

She stomped her foot down, nailing one of them on the instep—she didn't know who. A howl of pain rattled her eardrums, the sound raking along the back of her neck. She fell forward, catching herself on the tile with the palms of her hands, and pushed back up into a sprint.

But someone grabbed her foot, yanking her off balance and dragging her back. She tried to kick off her shoe, but he had a firm grip on her ankle. He pulled harder, and her upper body went down while her right leg stayed aloft. She banged her chin on stone, teeth ripping into the side of her tongue. Blood flooded her mouth.

Singer leapt out of her shadow with a vicious snarl.

"What the—?" Ethan barked.

But Singer was intercepted by Ethan's leopard Familiar. Soon, Chad

and Garrett's were joining in, the three animals fencing Singer in near a corner of the room.

He couldn't get to her. And she couldn't get to him—

Screaming with all the breath left in her lungs, Loren flipped over, kicking and thrashing as hard as she could. Her heel connected with Chad's forehead. He fell backward with a curse on his lips.

She managed to get on her feet, but then Ethan was there, ripping the shoulder of her cardigan as he pulled her back against his body.

"Feisty," he breathed in her ear, his skin boiling hot. "I like that." She felt his erection press into her ass.

"Get off me, you prick!" She shoved away from him, her limbs tangling with his.

Ethan took the back of her head to his teeth, but his hold on her wouldn't relent, fingers bruising her arms. He spun her around to face him and clamped a hand over her mouth. "Stupid bitch!" His teeth were stained with blood. He spat a mouthful of saliva in her face, red gobs clinging to her hair. "You'll pay for that, cunt."

She flung all her weight on him. "Let go!" she shrieked.

But he didn't.

She jumped and twisted, throwing her elbows into his gut. He grunted and lurched to the side as she knocked him off balance—

A scream ripped out of her lungs, her foot slipping off the slick edge of the pool.

She fell back, taking Ethan down with her, sharp nails ripping into his neck as they crashed into the pool, water bursting around them.

—

Darien couldn't move. He couldn't even work his tongue to scream.

Shadowy teeth came at him from a misshapen form that had pits for eyes. It was a mass of shadow and mist and things he couldn't describe—things he'd never seen before.

The creature had no aura. But a smell...it had a smell. It was the stink of an old grave, the smoke of a forest fire, and the must of centuries' old wood polish, like furniture that had spent too long sitting in an antique store. He wasn't sure what to make of it.

But it didn't matter, because his time was up. He couldn't move, couldn't talk, couldn't call upon his magic. The air exited his lungs like someone had punched them flat, and his heart began to beat slower and slower as the creature sucked the life out of him. A vortex of bitterly cold wind tore through the room.

As his heart slowed, beat by beat, he felt stretched thin, like his soul was being extracted from his body. Currents of ink-black, slate-gray, and a handful of dim colors bled out of his body as the thing

feasted—

And then Bandit was scrabbling out from under the couch, nails grappling for purchase. With a deafening bark that generated a sound wave Darien could feel, the Familiar pounced, a burst of his magic rippling out in a dark wave—a sight Darien had never seen before—that rivalled the thick shadows of the monster.

It let go. And thank the Star it did, because Darien was able to rally his magic then, able to breathe.

Forming a wall of magic protecting him from the demon, he righted himself midair and dropped to his feet in a crouch. His boots thumped on the floorboards, rattling jewelry and shelves and an old chandelier.

“RUN!” The word tore out of him, the sound as ragged as he felt. He was up in an instant, sprinting blindly for the hallway, Bandit right on his heels. Their footsteps thudded on the floor, the boards creaking and groaning in protest. They sank with every step, threatening to snap.

*Don't break, Darien begged. Don't break, don't break, don't break.*

The door neared, the faintest glow of moonlight shining through, a beacon declaring safety.

Darien's fingers closed around the screen door, boots skidding across rotting wood. When the demon attacked again, he felt his magic disintegrate as if it were nothing, but he was already out the door.

He didn't stop running until he was off the lawn, across the street, and slamming to a stop against the car door, Bandit so close he almost stepped on his paws. The spells on the car hummed and gave way as it sensed their presence.

Bandit was barking at him, the sound bouncing down the night-darkened street. *Open it! Open it!*

“I'm trying!” He opened the door, nearly ripping the handle clean off. He got inside, banging his head on the door, pulling Bandit up onto his lap before slamming it shut.

The spells rippled over the car. For once in his life Darien didn't mind the nausea it brought to his stomach, the chill it raised on his arms, hairs prickling. The spells meant they were safe.

That demon...it was new. Another unknown not catalogued in any book. He didn't pray often, but as he sat panting behind the wheel, holding Bandit tight, he prayed that thing couldn't get in here.

Bandit usually preferred to stay in Darien's shadow, but he sat there on his lap for minutes, paws on Darien's shoulders. They panted in unison, staring at the house. The old structure was quiet and still, no trace of the chaos that'd just ensued, as if it had never happened.

Darien pulled his eyes from the house and looked at Bandit. Bandit

looked back at him, the dog so close, their noses were almost touching.

They were both still catching their breath when Darien said, “Want to play fetch now?”

Water filled Loren's mouth, rushing down into the hollow pit of her stomach as Ethan pushed her head below the surface of the pool. She kicked and fought, chlorine burning her nose and throat. Water splashed and voices echoed, only audible when she was able to lift her head above the surface. Barely, and not high enough to breathe.

Sound became muffled again as Ethan pushed her back under, both of his hands on top of her head. Water plugged her ears and flooded her nose and throat.

Forty feet of clear blue stretched around her. The black-and-white tiles marking the depths of the pool were wavy and distorted. They shimmered like a dream, the sight of them hypnotizing.

Her lungs burned, and her limbs were weak. While her arms hung limp and buoyant in the water, her feet fought for purchase, toes searching for solid ground. If she could shove off the floor of the pool and through Ethan's hold, she might be able to get back up...

Quiet swept in, and her vision darkened at the edges. Just as she began to fade away, Darien's face entered her mind. She thought of only him as she drifted and drifted...

A dull thud shook the pool. Through her eyelashes, Loren saw a blast of light and a ripple of color that looked like a watered-down rainbow, as if someone had dumped paint into the pool.

Was she hallucinating?

The water kept pushing and pushing. It was heavy. So heavy. She began to drift again under its relentless weight...

Ethan let go. The release was sudden, and she had no idea why it happened, but she didn't care. She took advantage of the only free moment she had and kicked to the surface, eyes and muscles burning. Gray still flooded her vision, the threat of death a cold breath on her neck, but she fought it. She fought hard, and an eternity later, she burst through the water with a strangled gasp.

Oxygen flooded her lungs, sweet as sugar. Her vision cleared, and her heart regained a strong beat that was soon bursting into a painful sprint.

Dallas and Sabine were calling her name from the edge of the pool, their voices hysterical. Ethan and his friends were shoving past them, sprinting out the door as if a ghost was on their heels.

"Loren!" Dallas dove into the water, body arcing in the air, wings tucked in tight. She hit the surface with a noisy splash and swam to



Loren's side, moving quickly despite the added weight from the wings. The silver around her pupils shone like mirrors, water lapping against her chin. "Are you okay?" She put an arm under hers, keeping her afloat.

"I'm fine." Loren's teeth were chattering, her mouth overwhelmed with the bitter taste of chlorine. "Just get me out of here. Please."

Dallas swam, pulling her along beside her. Loren did her best to kick her legs, but they were weak from being in here for so long, and from fighting Ethan and his friends. The bones in her hand burned; she hoped nothing was broken.

When they reached the edge of the pool, Sabrina helped them out, Loren first and then Dallas. Loren crawled away from the water, the floor rough and unyielding under her palms. Dallas and Sabrina came up beside her and threw their arms around her.

For minutes, they clung to each other on the wet floor, breathing hard and shivering. All the pool water Loren had swallowed was making her queasy.

Dallas was the first to speak. "What in the gods' names were you doing in here?"

"My conduit was glowing." It was hard to speak when her teeth were chattering. Her tongue still hurt from when she'd bitten it. "I felt...drawn to something."

Sabrina sat back, her eyes going wide. "Please tell me Ethan and his friends did that." She pointed with a trembling hand.

There was a jagged split in the floor, as if an earthquake had ripped it open. It cut right through the swimming pool and out the other side, where it traveled all the way up to the ceiling. That ceiling was crumbling. Debris floated in the water, no longer filled with color or light.

Loren opened her mouth to speak—

There was no way to describe the sound that came next, other than a roar. It filled the entire academy, guttural and deafening. It was louder than an airplane, louder than an explosion.

No one breathed. They clung to each other, staring unblinkingly in the direction the sound had come from.

The silhouette that fell upon the wall near the doors could only be described as a monster. A massive creature with razor-sharp claws and long sickles rising up from a jagged spine.

That door was the only way out. They were trapped.

Her conduit was glowing again, the invisible thread tugging her toward the demon.

Was it this monster that had been calling out to her? And if so, why?

"Where's your phone?" Dallas's voice was hollow as a drum.

Loren patted her pockets. "I don't have it."

"Here," Sabrina hissed. She took her phone out of her hoodie and shoved it at her. "Take mine. Hurry." Loren took it, fingers barely cooperating.

"You need to call Darien," Dallas said in a level voice. She grabbed them each by an arm and tugged them to their feet. The shadow was getting bigger. Closer. "You need to call Darien right now."

Loren fumbled to find the phone icon on Sabrina's screen as they made for the change room.

As she began to dial Darien's number, she looked over her shoulder—and regretted it instantly.

A skull-like head covered with gleaming white scales eased out from behind the corner, its fleshy gullet vibrating with a growl. Double rows of teeth that were jagged and rotting lined the creature's misshapen mouth. Thick, blood-tinged saliva dribbled down its chin and splashed onto the floor, foaming on the tile. There was a stone pushed into its forehead—a stone that looked like an amethyst.

Loren's blood iced over at the sight of its eyes. They were nothing but black pits that sucked up what little light was in the room, the areas around them webbed with gray. Somehow darker than the eyes of hellseehers, they were blacker than anything she'd ever seen.

And they settled on *her*.

The conduit glowed brighter, threatening to burn a hole in her shirt.

"Call him *NOW*, Loren!" Dallas bellowed. A growl slipped through the creature's teeth. They sprinted for the change room, puddles splashing. "*Now! Now! Call him RIGHT NOW!*"

—

*I don't care what we do*, Bandit said. *But I am not going the fuck back in there.* The Familiar almost never swore. He knew Darien would have his balls for doing so, like a father scolding his son. But Darien didn't care in that moment.

He scooped Bandit up and leaned across the car to set him on the passenger's seat. "Let's get out of here and never come back."

Darien started the engine and cranked the heat on high. He was freezing. Was that his breath hanging in the air?

*Phone's ringing*, Bandit said.

Shit. He hadn't even heard it. He fumbled it out of his pocket and answered without checking the caller identification. "Cassel."

"Darien?" Loren's soft voice drifted through the speaker, a sound he'd worried he might never hear again. His name was a wobbly mess on her tongue, as if she had been crying or...

Fear. That was fear he was hearing in her voice.

Darien sat up straighter, a fresh wave of adrenaline coursing through him. He didn't know why, but his eyes drifted toward the manor. "What's going on, baby?" This was the first time she'd called him in...he couldn't even remember how long. He'd lost track.

"We're trapped." The whispered sentence rattled the phone and turned his blood to ice. Bandit sat pin-straight in the passenger's seat, muscles tense, ears shifting back and forth as he listened. "Sabrine and Dallas are with me. We're stuck in the change room at the school's swimming pool, and we don't know how to get out—"

A sound he couldn't describe shredded the speaker. It was so loud, he pulled the phone away from his ear, his heart dropping into his stomach like a stone. "Loren, what was that?"

"There's something in here. A demon or something—"

*Fucking hell.* "Hold on, I'm coming." Cradling the phone against his shoulder, he threw the car into drive and pulled a U-turn. "Get someplace safe, okay? I need to call Tanner, but I'll be there soon—"

"Hurry, please—"

"Loren, I don't care what you need to do, you get to safety, no matter what it takes. Do you hear me?" The road flew by, the glow of streetlights blasting through the sunroof as he passed under them.

"I love you." It was a declaration, and it came out of her mouth on a shaky whisper that felt like a kick to the stomach.

"Don't." He grabbed the phone, gripping it tight. "Don't you do that, sweetheart. You can tell me in person." He wasn't going to lose her—not now, not ever.

He hung up and found Atlas on speed dial. He cranked the steering wheel, taking a turn so sharply, the tires squealed.

"What's up?" Tanner sounded like he was half-asleep.

"I need you to get me into Angelthene Academy. I just left Blackgate Manor, but I'm heading there right away."

"Blackgate?" Tanner sputtered. Sheets rustled in the background, followed by the thud of swift footsteps.

"I'll explain later."

"You sound like you're hurt."

"It doesn't matter. The girls are in trouble."

"Darien, hold on a second, pal, do you need help?"

"No." With a sigh, he admitted, "Probably. Is anyone at Hell's Gate?"

"I've got Max and Jack."

"Send them ASAP, and tell them to bring salt. Lots of it. Got it?"

"Got it. And be careful, will you?"

"Always am."

Loren was drained.

She had managed to use her gift from Tempus—whatever it was—to freeze the creature for two minutes near the locker rooms. Two.

It was barely enough, but they'd made it out of the swimming pool and were now running, feet clapping on the floors, breath rasping through the hallways. Dallas and Sabrine had their magic staves out, but they were already exhausted, their magic all used up. Even their Familiars were too drained to come back out of their shadows.

Angelthene Academy had two indoor shelters designed to protect against threats, but they were flawed in the sense that they operated on a timer. If you didn't make it in time, the doors would shut, and you would be trapped in the school with whatever threat had managed to breach the magic spells.

One shelter was too far away; it was several floors up. The one on the ground floor, right around the corner from the library, was where they were heading.

Loren could see it from here. Could see some of the students and professors gathered inside. Terror-stricken faces watched. Voices screamed, encouraging them. Telling them to run faster. To hurry.

"Wait!" Loren shouted, her voice crackling with exhaustion. "Please wait for us." But she knew it was no use; once the timer started it, it stopped for nothing.

Headmaster Miles Osborn pushed to the front of the group. His mouth opened around bellowed words, but Loren couldn't make any of them out over the din swelling in her ears. Her head.

"Faster!" Dallas shouted, the single word snapping against the stone walls. Torches streaked by in fiery blurs.

A piercing roar shredded the air at Loren's back. Her stomach plummeted out her ass, fear coating her veins.

The door of the shelter began to slide shut.

The Headmaster stumbled back, out of the path of the shutting door, the professors standing on either side of him doing the same.

They were going to leave them out here. They were *leaving* them—

"No," Loren rasped. No one was going to help them, none of the teachers. *No one*. She pushed herself faster, leg muscles screaming, heart about to burst. "*Please.*"

But the shelter door banged shut.

A scream of anger tore out of Dallas's lungs. On Loren's other side, Sabrine sobbed. None of them slowed. They kept running for the shelters, driven by a fool's hope.

Loren knew she wasn't the only one who could hear the creature coming. They were too far away from any exit, any windows.

She caught herself with a hand thrown against the sealed door of the shelter, nearly spraining her good wrist. Looked over her shoulder. The monster was coming. And Darien still wasn't here.

---

Too much time was passing. Too much fucking time.

Darien paced before the gates to Angelthene Academy for Magic, phone glued to his ear. Keys clicked in the background—the only sound to indicate that his call with Tanner hadn't dropped.

Max and Jack stood beside him, watching the school for any signs of what was going on inside the walls. They'd both tried numerous times to get a hold of the girls since Loren had made the initial call for help, but every attempt had gone straight to voicemail.

He didn't know how much longer he could take it. Knowing Loren was in that school, trapped with gods-knew-what...

The lack of cell reception in the academy had to have something to do with the protective spellwork covering the property. By now, it would've sensed the unauthorized threat and gone haywire trying to search for flaws in its own system.

That was another thing stumping Darien: how a demon had managed to get into the school. The last time something like this had happened, it was because the spells recognized the students even after the Well replica had transformed them into demons. But this time...

Darien paced faster, his back to the academy as he stared at the road that sloped down into the sprawling city. Buildings and freeways glimmered with lights; he could see Blackbird 88 Above from here.

"Darien." Max shoved him in the shoulder to get his attention.

Darien turned...

His blood ran cold at the sight of the school.

The spell system was malfunctioning. A dome of colorful ripples and ancient runes had become visible to the naked eye, flickering and buzzing against the thick blanket of night. And inside the school, people were screaming, alarm system blaring.

Jack was gaping at the building. "Tell Tanner to hurry up!"

"Atlas," Darien bit out, gripping the phone so hard he nearly crushed it. "You have to get us in there right now."

"I'm almost finished." Keys clacked louder.

Max murmured, "Come on. Come on."

Tanner said, "Ten seconds left, and you'll have five to get over the fence. Got it? The spells are freaking out—"

"Yeah, I can see, we have front-row seats." The colorful runes rippled like a kaleidoscope; he felt dizzy just looking at them.

Seven, six, five...

“Call me if you need anything,” Tanner added quickly.

Four, three...

Darien hung up. Put his phone in his pocket. He watched the dome, feet braced apart.

Two, one...

They bolted, launching themselves up the fence as the rainbow dome faded into a smattering of sparks. Chain-link rattled as they scaled it, landing on the grass on the other side. Magic seared the air, but by the time the dome had buzzed back into place, they were already halfway across the property, booking it to the front doors of the school. The colorful runes and waves danced on the dark grass, lighting them up and playing on their clothes like they were at a festival.

The scream that came next didn't belong to a victim but a predator—a roar that trembled the ground and exploded the glass on the windows, shards showering the grass. Darien's heart was beating so hard, it was going to jump out of his chest.

They blew through the locked doors, wood splintering, and ran down the hallways, boots slapping the floors, Familiars bounding at their sides. Together they ran, following the sound of screaming and fleeing footsteps and furniture breaking. The tinge of candle smoke in the air told Darien that Dallas and Sabrina were using what little magic they possessed to keep the creature away. Even with his Sight, Darien could see nothing, just like that night under the Strangler Fig. But he knew where they would find the demon; even without the noise, the stench alone was enough of a clue.

“Do you smell that?” Max spoke Darien's thought aloud.

It was the smell of death. A thick odor of rotting meat and sweat that didn't belong to anything of this world.

The thing was in the library; he could hear it. Darien didn't allow himself to think about the girls and where they were as he ran faster.

They swung around the corner and through the open doorways, leaping over heaps of crumbled stone and splintered wood, and came face to face with—

He screeched to a halt, Max and Jack doing the same. Near the far wall of the room were Loren, Dallas, and Sabrina. Banged up and filthy but alive, thank the gods. And standing before them, blocking their path to the doors, was the most terrifying creature Darien had ever seen.

“Fuck me,” Maximus gritted out just as Jack shouted, “What the *hell* is that?” Well, there was a plus side to every situation, and this time it was the fact that Max and Jack could see this monster too. Maybe he wasn't so crazy after all.

Darien's eyes turned black as he called upon his magic, diving into

the stores of Stygian salts in his system. “Kill it,” was his only instruction.

The thing was bigger than his truck. It was white as bone and walked on all fours, its head hairless, its back ridged with lethal spikes. Its eyes were two black pits sunken into a skull-like face, and its teeth were jagged—two rows of them. It was exactly like the thing Darien swore he’d seen in the Devil’s Advocate.

But he didn’t have a chance to think about it any longer, because it was lunging for them.

Darien’s magic snapped into place, a wall like smoke parrying the creature’s attack.

The demon’s spiked tail lashed out like a whip, cracking into his shield with such force that his magic nearly buckled—and so did he. He held firm, teeth grinding, sweat beading on his temples.

“Get between it and the girls!” Darien barked at Max, who immediately dove forward, sliding on the floor past the demon, narrowly missing another swipe of its deadly tail.

After what just happened at Blackgate, Darien had no clue how to kill this thing. But there was no way of finding out until he’d exhausted all his options, so he grabbed a gun and started firing, reserving his magic for when—and if—they needed it.

The creature bellowed a roar, ducking its head as bullets struck—struck but didn’t penetrate. They bounced off its body like stones, doing just as little damage.

Darien swore and threw the gun aside. He would need to get closer—as close as he had the demon under the Strangler Fig. Which meant he would need to lower his shield.

He waited until the creature divebombed for him, smashing into the wall of his magic. The shield crackled and sputtered, magic zipping and barrelling like black electricity and thick smoke into the demon’s body. Darien wasn’t sure how he could see it; hellseher magic had always been invisible, even with the Sight.

Darien lowered the wall and ran for it, drawing a knife from his belt.

He leapt up onto the creature’s back, right behind its head. The thing thrashed from side to side, trying to throw him off. He grunted and held on, eyes dark with the Sight but utterly blinded by the fact that he couldn’t see this thing’s aura. It was by sheer luck alone that he didn’t impale himself on the many spikes standing up out of its spine—each of them nearly as long as his forearm—as he wound up and sank the blade into the soft skin at the back of the thing’s neck.

Only, it *should’ve* sunk in. Instead, he was met with flesh that was as hard and impenetrable as stone, the force of the attack reverberating up his arm and into his shoulder, rattling his brain in his

skull.

The creature took advantage of his surprise and threw him off with a mighty roar, slamming him to the ground on his back. Suddenly, it was on top of him, massive claws on either side of his head. The loudest noise Darien had ever heard came out of its lungs as it dove for his throat, rotting gums pulsing—

Darien grabbed it by the open jaws. Teeth ripped into his fingers, and his own blood trickled under the sleeves of his jacket. “Little fucking help here!” he bellowed, arms shaking as he held the creature back.

And then Max was there, cutting through the tendons on the back of the creature’s ankles, where its otherworldly skin was thinnest.

It reared back, bellowing in pain. It struck Max with a lash of its tail, and he and Grim went flying into a bookshelf with shouts and pained growls, wood and paper bursting around them.

Darien rolled, dodging a swipe of claws. He scrambled to his feet and ran, Bandit right on his heels. The demon kept chasing him, each of its steps shaking the ground. Finally, he was able to snap his magic back into position, shielding him from yet another blow that would’ve been fatal if he’d acted half a second later.

“Where’s Jacky?!” Darien shouted.

Jack’s voice bounced from the library doors behind him. “Here.” He chucked something at Darien, who had to let down his magic long enough to allow the blur of an object to pass through. He caught it, realizing Jack had tossed him a flamethrower. “Light that piece of shit up,” Jack said.

Darien did. Flames barrelled across the floor, setting furniture on fire in its path. The demon bellowed in anger and agony as it retreated to the farthest corner of the library, shutting its eyes against the heat.

The sight of Max stumbling away from the inferno made Darien curse. Max was afraid of fire.

But they had to do this.

“Hold it there!” Darien shouted. He tossed the flamethrower to Jack and said, “Keep burning it.” He reached into his pocket and retrieved the single grenade he had on him—a last-resort weapon very seldom used, even on Hounds. Of the girls, he instructed Max, “Shield them.”

Darien rallied his magic, using up the last of the salts in his bloodstream to reinforce the shield—black and shimmering, the strength of his power doubled by Bandit, who stood at his side—around himself and Jack, who was forming a wall of his own with Twitch’s help, his magic still invisible, just like Max’s.

And with Loren, Dallas, and Sabrine now shielded by Max, Darien pulled the pin out with his teeth and threw.



There was a moment of quiet and stillness. Darien crouched down, bracing himself, arms over his head.

And then the room exploded with a bang and a blast of fire, the bright eruption of heat temporarily blinding him.

The spells on the building kept the ceiling from coming down, but everything else in the library went up in flames and burst into pieces—and so did the demon. Chunks of bone and charred flesh rained down around them and rolled across the floor.

Jack was the first to stand. He stared disbelievingly at what was left of the monster, and then he cracked a merry grin that only Jacky could crack. “Fuck me. That actually worked.”

Loren's heart wouldn't slow. Bile burned her throat as she looked around at the destruction of the library.

The demon was nothing but chunks of still-burning flesh and charred bone scattered across the floor. The gruesome sight made the bile climb higher up her throat, where it seeped across her tongue, twisting her stomach.

Tonight had been a close call. Darien, Max, and Jack were mostly unharmed, thank the gods. But it had taken all three of them and their Familiars to kill a single monster. The reality of that didn't sit well with her, and she found herself wanting to puke again.

Breathing hard through clenched teeth, she bent over, bracing her hands on her knees. Those pesky stars were drifting across her vision again, and her arm was burning, her tattoo shouting a distress signal.

Darien made his way over to her, kicking aside rock, singed wood, and what looked like body parts. She tried not to focus on those. There was a slight limp in his step, but aside from that, he appeared unharmed.

"Loren." That rich voice had her knees weakening in a whole different way. "Sweetheart, are you alright?" He helped her straighten and drew her into his arms, holding her tight, loving her the same way he always did, as if she hadn't run out on him last weekend, as if nothing had changed between them at all, as if she hadn't stomped on his heart by grabbing her things and leaving the home he'd provided for her. "Are you hurt?" Strong hands rubbed her back in comforting circles. "Tell me what hurts, sweetheart." Oh, how she missed this.

"I'm okay," she said around chattering teeth. Tears burned her eyes as she wrapped her arms around him, fingers digging into his muscular back through his leather jacket, not realizing until now how badly she'd needed to be held by him, how badly she'd needed to know that he didn't hate her for the distance that had been wedged between them. She greedily breathed in the scent of his skin, his clothes, that masculine cologne he always wore, the fragrance momentarily transporting her back to the very first time she'd ever sat in his car. "Are *you* okay?"

"Don't you worry about me." He ran a hand over her hair, his face buried in the strands. He was breathing her in, just as she was breathing him in, as if he'd thought he would never get the chance to again. "Don't you worry about me."

He held her for a long time as Jack and Max checked in on Dallas and Sabrina. With Darien's body pressed solidly against hers, it didn't take long for her heart to slow. That sick feeling in her stomach went away, and she melted in his arms, all her worry of the night's events disappearing into the past, exactly where it belonged.

But then Darien's arms loosened. "Loren." His voice had that deep and dangerous tone that made the hairs on her arms stand on end. It was the kind of voice he reserved for specific people and situations. "Why are you wet?" He caught a strand of her hair between his fingers and lifted it to his nose, inhaling the chlorine. She didn't need to be a hellseher to know there were other smells he was picking up on, too. The look of brutal murder that washed over his face told her that he recognized the metallic scent of blood, some of which was not her own, and the salt of sweat. Sweat that belonged to a guy—three of them. Her heart broke into a fresh sprint as Darien bit out, "What happened here?"

"It's nothing." But she said it too quickly, and that was when he spotted the rip in her cardigan.

He grabbed her wrist and pushed her sleeve up to her elbow.

There were bruises dotting her ivory skin. Big purple bruises and cuts snaking all the way around her arm.

She tried to pull away, but he held firm. "I fell, Darien," she spluttered. "It's not what it looks like."

"These aren't bruises from falling, Loren, they're fucking handprints." Steel-blue eyes blazed down at her, the look on his face sharp enough to cut. "Where are the fuckers that did this to you?"

But he didn't have a chance to find out, because a male voice boomed against the walls. "*You!*"

Loren turned to see Headmaster Miles Osborn storming into the room. Two other teachers were with him, murmuring in horror and astonishment as they took in the wreckage of the library and the three slayers standing in the middle of it, covered in dust and blood.

Osborn pointed between them. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Later," Darien told Loren, that fire in his eyes still kindling. He let go of her in a way that suggested he was reluctant to do so, and turned to face the headmaster. "I think a thank-you is in order."

Osborn scoffed. "For breaking into the school?" He pointed again between Darien, Jack, and Max. "You boys are nothing but glorified criminals—"

"Who just saved your worthless balls!" Jack exclaimed, arms thrown out at his sides.

"Look around you," Darien berated. "If we hadn't shown up, these three students would be dead right now, do you understand me? They would be dead, and your school would be answering to the MPU, who

would more than likely conduct an investigation to figure out why the fuck you locked your students outside the shelters.”

When the echo of Darien’s words rolled away, what remained was silence, the sudden absence of sound thick enough to feel.

Osborn’s next words fluttered with pathetic weakness. “They operate on a timer—”

“I don’t give a flying fuck. If any of your students are in trouble, you have an obligation as headmaster to escort them to safety, even if it means putting your own life on the line. Not hiding like cowards in your fucking bunker while some demon goes to town on your premises.”

Loren could see the ice thawing from Osborn’s face as the reality of his mistake set in. A detrimental mistake made by a new headmaster, the kind that could cost him his job.

Darien concluded, deadly gaze sweeping over the teachers, “And I see no one here who followed through with their responsibilities by protecting them. No one but us—the men you call glorified criminals.”

Silence resumed.

Professor Griffith was the first to step forward. “Perhaps we got off on the wrong foot.”

Max snarled, “I’ll fucking say.”

Despite Max’s tone, Griffith spoke softly. “Is there anything we can do to thank you?”

“We don’t want your money,” Darien said. “What we want is for you to swear to never let this happen again.”

“Of course.” Griffith nodded, the other professor—a man who taught incantations—nodding as well.

The headmaster was assessing Darien, his expression stuck somewhere between fear and admiration. “If anyone asks, we called you.” The pleading look in his eyes was clear as daylight. He seemed to be saying, *Can you do that for me?*

When Darien’s lips twitched up at the edges, Loren caught herself staring at that mouth for a long time. He gave one sharp nod. “You called us,” he said.

“Good,” Osborn said, looking relieved. “Great. We’ll clean this up. You can head out.”

Darien was heading back over to Loren before Osborn had finished speaking, entirely disregarding him and the words he’d meant to be orders. He took her face into his hands, thumbs rubbing what she presumed was blood and dirt off her cheeks. Her hand still burned, but it was dull enough now to suggest that she hadn’t broken anything.

“Darien,” she croaked. “I’m okay.”

“They tried to drown you.” Darn, he was good. “What else did they

do?" When she tried to duck her head, he lowered his, forcing her to look up at him, the blue of his eyes bright against the fringe of his inky eyelashes. "What else did they do?" he repeated.

"Nothing."

"Did they touch you?" Those blazing eyes scanned every part of her, searching for damage. "Loren, if anyone touched you, I will break every bone in their fucking body—"

"No!"

"You're lying to me."

"I'm not!" she hissed, being careful to keep her words muted. The professors were observing out of the corners of their eyes, clearly not knowing what to think of the exchange. Loren persisted, "Darien, I don't want any trouble, okay? This is my schooling we're talking about. I just want to go about my classes and not have to even remember that any of this happened." Those boys weren't worth it, not with everything else going on. And the last thing she needed was for Darien to cause a scene in the school and attract the imperator.

"It's not that easy." But he stopped, because he could see that her eyes were shining. Her mouth wobbled, and she watched as the sight of her pain thawed the ice in his veins, the anger in his expression shifting into an unwilling calm. "Fine," he bit out. "We'll forget about it for tonight."

"Thank you."

"But you need to tell me if they ever try anything again, do you understand me? I don't care if you're still not talking to me, if they so much as look at you, I want to hear about it."

"Darien—"

"Promise me, or I'm never leaving your side again, and you'll have to bail me out of jail for killing every student in this school until I find out who it was." Even though the threat wasn't directed at her, Loren felt a chill lick down the length of her spine.

"I promise." But he didn't look like he believed her, so she repeated fervently, "I promise, Darien."

When Darien let go of her, she caught sight of the droves of students filling the hallway outside the doors to the library. Faces peered in, and frantic whispering began, causing the headmaster to walk out of the library and start directing students back to their houses.

Among those students, Loren spotted Klay. Watching her. His eyes were cold with accusation, his mouth set in a hard line of disapproval. The sight of him had Loren temporarily forgetting that Darien was standing right in front of her, still staring down at her with a level of concern so deep, it broke her heart.

And then her heart broke further as he said quietly, "How long is

this going to go on for?”

She blinked up at him. “How long is what going to go on for?”

The question caused his hands to curl into fists at his sides, tattoos stretching across his knuckles. “For god’s sake, Loren, I’m going crazy over here. Just give me something I can work with—a date when I can see you or something, I don’t know.” His breathing turned ragged. “Are we ever going to get back to what we used to be?”

Her eyes flashed to Klay again. He was still watching, the threat in his eyes clear. One phone call, and the imperator would act. “Darien, it hasn’t even been a week—”

“Do you want me on my knees? Do you want me to beg, is that it? Because I will. I’ll crawl for you.”

Griffith wasn’t even pretending not to watch anymore; she was flat-out staring, and so was the other professor. Jack and Max were watching too, where they stood beside Dallas and Sabrine. Even their Familiars, Twitch and Grim, were staring.

Loren swallowed the thick feeling in her throat, the kind that told her she had seconds left before she would burst into tears. “I don’t want that—”

“Then what do you want, Lola? I know I’m pretty new to this whole dating thing, but I seem to be missing how we can go from being glued to the hip after Kalendae to barely even messaging each other.”

“I can’t—” The words got stuck again, stilled by that stupid spell.

His brows shot up. “Can’t what?”

“Just give me a few more days.”

“A few more days,” he repeated incredulously. His eyes shut, nostrils flaring wide. When he reopened his eyes, they were solid black. Even after killing that demon, one of those awful Surges had him in its grip. “A few more days, and you’ll miraculously stop hating me?”

She tried to say it again—tried to speak around the spell. But her voice got stuck in her throat, and she couldn’t even croak. The only thing she managed to choke out, the words a shaky and pathetic whisper, was, “I’m afraid of Gaven.” It was the best excuse she could think of—the only way to get him out of here safely before Klay decided to wreck everything by tattling to his dad. Klay, who was still watching, the stupid ass, his face partially hidden behind the groups of students who refused to go back to their houses.

Darien was studying her. “You’re afraid of Gaven.”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“I would never let anything or anyone hurt you, sweetheart.”

“It’s not about that.”

The black in his eyes seemed to deepen, if that were possible. So did his frown, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “There’s a lot of shit

going on, Loren. I've been dealing with a lot of shit I've been dying to tell you about, but you haven't been talking to me, and it's killing me to stay away from you when I should be protecting—" He abruptly stopped. Drew a deep breath. "I'm worried about you," he breathed.

"I'm fine."

"Do you promise you would tell me if you were in trouble?"

"Yes, Darien."

"And you're fine?"

"I'm fine."

"Really?"

"Really," she insisted. "I'm standing here right now, aren't I?" She gestured to herself. "I'm in one piece." She said again, "I'm fine."

The reality of her words seemed to sink in, and the harsh look on his face told her what he was thinking: he was wrong to believe something bad was happening with her. She was staying away from him by choice, not because she was being forced to, not because she was in trouble.

It felt like someone had driven a knife through her heart, pushing it in so deep that it burst through her back.

Darien bit out, "I have to go." He walked away before she could say anything else.

Tears burned her eyes, and her lungs hurt so much that she had to brace her hands on her knees again.

She hated Klay. She hated the emperor. She hated how she was being forced to do this, and that she hadn't found a way around it yet.

Darien was several feet away when he stopped. Tipping his head back, he looked up at the burnt ceiling, his back facing her. He seemed to be warring with himself about what he should do, weighing his desire with his undying respect for her, as Darien so often did.

And then he turned around and came back.

A sob crawled up her throat as he took her hands off her knees and helped her stand straight.

"I love you," he said. The words were strong, yet somehow still gentle in a way that only Darien could manage. "I love you, and your fears are valid, okay?" He cradled her face in his hands again. "I'll fix all of this, I promise. I'll fix it, and then you can come back home." His throat bobbed with a swallow, and his eyes filled with emotion, the black temporarily gone. "If...if you still want it to be your home." The question in his words was like a fist to her gut, and she nearly doubled over from the pain. "Do you?"

"Of course." The words were a cry that tore out of her, and suddenly she couldn't see.

He nodded. "Okay. Okay, great." Those eyes flicked to her lips. "Can I kiss you?"

She managed a bumpy nod.

He pulled her face to his and kissed her on the mouth, the salt of her tears running between her lips and his. When he pulled away, he studied her again, desperate for answers.

"I don't understand," he whispered. "I'm feeling that you don't want me to leave, but you're *telling* me to."

"I'm confused." The words were out before she could stop them.

They weren't her words.

"Confused." His features hardened. "What do you mean you're confused?"

"Not about you."

"*I'm* fucking confused."

"I'll talk to you in a few days, okay?"

"Baby, please—"

"Dare," Jack called, his voice breaking them apart far too soon. When Darien didn't move, Jack whistled sharply. "Time to run." He gestured to the detectives and cops rushing into the room. Students still lingered in groups, despite the firm instructions from the headmaster to return to their dorms.

Darien wiped her tears away and kissed her one more time, a light brushing of his lips against hers that made every bone in her body beg for more. "Just in case I don't get to do it again," he whispered, breath fanning her mouth.

And then he let her go and walked away, Jack and Max at his sides.

Bandit threw her a backward glance that told her he missed her just as much as Darien did, his cropped tail drooping in a way that made this whole night so much worse.

Loren had never felt so alone in all her life than she did in that moment, watching Darien walk away, watching him fully accept her lousy excuse not to see him. But what hurt worse was knowing how *he* felt. At least she knew the full side to every story that was going on right now, but he...he was being kept in the dark about hers.

He was being kept in the dark, and because of it she could feel him slipping away, and she feared she would lose him to that darkness before she found a way to bring the light back in.



After what happened at Angelthene Academy, Darien had planned on going to the Pit. It was where he was heading now, blood thrumming with rage, his heart a shattered chunk of ice in his chest that hurt with every breath he drew.

But as he was nearing the unnamed street where the abandoned warehouse awaited him, and his keen hearing picked up on the faint cheers of the crowd already gathered inside, he changed course at the last second and cranked the wheel.

Tires screeched as he pulled a sharp U-turn and sped down the deserted streets, the green glow of mercury vapor streetlights blasting the leather seats as the car passed under them. Demon eyes glowed from dark alleys, and the odd vampire soared above the towering buildings, barely visible in the shadows of the night.

Both hands on his watch were pointing at the twelfth hour. The city was awash with the colors of night, shades of black and blue and gray tucked between buildings, quarrelling with the glow of the LED streetlamps, whose pools of murky light bled across graffitied sidewalks.

This was the hour of witches and demons. It was the hour of the howling wolf and creatures that thirsted for blood.

Creatures like him. Blood was calling out to him, a beckoning he needed to answer.

He drove farther south, until he could see the foggy lights of the Umbra Forum gleaming off the winding Angelthene River. Water serpents swam through its depths, ridged backs breaking the surface as they feasted on scraps in the silty riverbed.

Darien slowed the car, his movements so mechanical, it felt like his brain was disconnected from his body. Maybe it was better that way—better if he didn't allow himself to think about what he was doing. If he thought too hard, there was a chance he would convince himself to go back home.

But there was nothing there for him now, no reason to want to go back. Funny how things had changed so quickly.

When he parked by the curb near the river, he grabbed his duffel bag out of the trunk and made his way through the Umbra Forum, ignoring the probing and wary gazes of the people selling contraband and imported items at their stalls and storefronts, ignoring the teenaged warlocks tagging walls and dumpsters in the dark alleys,

cans of spray paint clanging as liquified gas and pigment were shaken together by gloved hands. The barred doors he passed stunk of Blood Potions and the tarlike reek of Venom cooked in obsidian pots.

He refused to consider the consequences of what he was doing as he reached the graffiti-marked arena. The door was guarded by a werewolf bouncer, who let him through with hardly a glance. Far less of an asshole, this one. Darien wouldn't have minded finally settling the score with the other bouncer who'd given him such grief when he'd brought Loren and Dallas here last year. Had anything worse than catcalling happened to the girls, Darien wouldn't have killed the wolf, but he would've made him spend the rest of his life wishing he was dead.

The inside of the warehouse was lit with rows of swampy bulbs that bathed the tiers of benches in a bluish-green glow. People were staggering to their seats, drunk or high or both, spilling dark liquor from overflowing red cups and shooting up in the shadowed areas of the building. The place reeked of sweat, blood, cheap cologne, and even cheaper drugs.

Casen Martel wasn't far from the entrance. He was talking among a group of warlocks, wolves, and vampires when he caught sight of Darien heading toward him. From the sound of the ring announcer near the caged octagon platform, who shouted into a megaphone, a new match would be starting in about ten minutes.

Perfect.

With the Butcher's attention now on Darien, the conversation the group was having faded into silence, and all eyes fell on him.

Darien paid the others no mind as he jerked his chin at Casen in greeting. "You got room for one more?"

The Butcher's curious smile grew into a wicked grin. "Shit, Cassel. I thought you'd never ask. Suit up—you're about to get real bloody."

—

The fights lulled him to sleep like a baby in a rocking chair, violence and blood his personal lullaby.

Lying flat on his back on a bench in the middle of the change room of the Chopping Block, Darien slept like the dead. One knee propped up, fingers laced on his chest. He woke up only once—just long enough to crack open his eyes to see the blue-lit change room surrounding him—before drifting off again.

He'd lost all sense of time and place when something stirred him awake. The bench creaked with movement that wasn't his own.

"Cassel." A boot nudged his, making him grunt. "Cassel."

Darien cracked open his eyes. When he caught sight of the male

face leaning over him, he recoiled, a curse word floating off his lips.

Where the hell was he?

The Butcher's face sharpened into view. "I looked a lot better last night, hey?" he joked.

"Ha-ha," Darien grumbled, slinging a hand over his eyes to block out the bluish light. "Very funny."

"Don't tell me you slept here." A frown coated the Butcher's words. He glanced about, the rubber of his giant boots squeaking on the floor.

"Fine," Darien slurred. "I won't tell you."

"Jeez, Cassel. When did you become such a wreck?"

"The day I was born."

"Pretty sure it doesn't work that way, kid. But I admire your pessimism." He kicked his boot again, hard enough to jar the bench, sage-green paint flaking off in strips. "Get up, will you? Unless you'd like to wake up in an hour with a bunch of sweaty and bloody men surrounding you." Boots pounded against the walls as he walked away.

When Darien peeked at him from under his wrist, the lights stung his eyes. "You're hosting daytime fights?"

Casen turned to face him, trench coat swaying. "Daytime? It's six o'clock."

Darien lifted his head. "P.m.?"

"Yeah, fucking p.m."

Darien sat up, clutching his head as the room spun. He glanced down at the clothes he was wearing to find they were clean. At least he'd showered before passing out, but he had no memory of that.

The door creaked as the Butcher pushed it open.

"If you want me to fight again, I could go for a round," Darien called.

Casen paused, one big hand propping the door open. "How about in a couple hours? It might get too predictable if you keep ripping all the guys apart when the night's barely begun."

"I'd say I'm sorry, but if I did I would be lying."

The Butcher flashed him a wicked grin. "Fuck off for a couple hours, and the floor is all yours."

"I'm looking forward to it." In the meantime, he had a job to do.

It was time to return that briefcase to Gaven's warehouse. And while he was there, he planned on doing some more searching.

—

"You got any naked photos of her?" Malakai's voice pulled Darien's attention away from his phone screen—and the photograph of Loren.

They were in his truck again, waiting for the watch to switch at

one a.m. so they could sneak the briefcase back into Gaven's warehouse and see what else the stupid prick kept in there.

"What?" Darien demanded, shooting Malakai a cold stare.

"You got any naked photos of her?"

"That's for me to know and for you to never find out." He returned to staring at Loren's gorgeous face on the screen. She was smiling at the camera, head slightly tilted down, waves of golden hair cascading over her chest. He'd cropped himself out of the photo; he hated looking at the face that reminded him so much of Randal. Her, on the other hand... He could stare at her forever. He'd never seen a face as sweet and beautiful as hers, and he'd seen a lot in his lifetime.

Malakai lunged across the vehicle and snatched Darien's phone out of his hand.

Darien moved, throwing himself across the vehicle, but the Reaper was holding his phone too far away. "Malakai, if you look at a single one, I swear to the gods, I will break both of your hands—"

"Alright, alright." He threw his phone back at Darien, who caught it before it could smash into his nose. "You really like this one, hey?"

With a scowl, Darien lowered himself back into his seat. "Maybe if you would stop banging lost bar-going chicks who only have half a brain, and start paying attention to the people around you, you could find someone you care about too."

Malakai's eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel like you're making a dig about me and Asp again?"

"Because I am."

Slumping against his door, elbow braced at the base of the window, Malakai cupped his mouth and stared out the glass. "Asp's too good for me." The mumbled words were nearly inaudible, but Darien recognized the regret coating every single one.

"It's your loss then." He slipped his phone into his pocket and watched the van approaching on the road down below.

As soon as the watch had switched, the van rolling away, he opened his door and stepped out into the night—another evening with a record-breaking low temperature, his breath fogging in the air before him.

The operation went smoothly, Creature acting as a watch-bat again at the corners of the building—much to the irritation of Bandit—as they disarmed the guards, never once allowing any of them the time to turn around and see their faces.

And then they rolled the warehouse door up and stepped inside. As Malakai ventured deeper into the warehouse, Darien placed the briefcase back on the stack, exactly where he'd found it, his hands covered in black gloves to protect his fingerprints.

"Dare," Malakai called in a hushed voice from halfway across the

building. He was standing beside a tarp-covered skid. "Let's check this out, shall we?" He threw the tarp off to reveal a skid of black crates, identical to the ones they'd transported to Casa Brewery in the back of one of Gaven's vans. Now that they were in the warehouse that had solid walls of protection, the crates weren't covered in concealment spells.

Darien joined Malakai and slid the lid off one of the crates, the scrape of wood rippling through the building.

Inside were boxes of ammunition. They were solid black, not a single one marked. He grabbed one and popped open the lid, only to find what appeared to be glass bullets inside, each of them a different color, just like the cylinders in the silver briefcases.

Malakai stepped up beside him and peered into the box. "These the bullets that guy at the Block was talking about?"

"Looks like it." If these were the bullets used to kill demons, then the cylinders were likely what his client was using to bring down the Veils.

The scuff of footsteps put them both on high alert. They whirled around at the same time, hands going to their guns—

Only to find a male hellseher standing halfway across the warehouse, looking stunned, feet inching backward.

"Fuck!" Darien barked. He threw the box of ammunition aside and took off after the hellseher, who turned and bolted, making a beeline straight for the door.

Malakai drew his gun and chased after him, three sets of boots now slapping cement. Malakai fired a few shots, but the hellseher was fast. He dodged every one, ducking behind skids and stacks of briefcases to keep Malakai from hitting him with a winning shot.

The guy had nearly reached the door that was still open to the smothering night when Darien tackled him to the ground with a shout.

They rolled into a stack of briefcases, knocking the whole thing over. Darien grunted as he took a few to the back of the head, the rest clattering to the floor. He straddled the guy's chest, pinning his arms beneath his knees. Just as Darien was reaching for his gun, smoke jetted out of the guy's nose.

"What the hell?" Darien panted. Veins that looked like molten lava spread across the guy's skin, burning it on impact, his irises turning a vibrant red. His mouth opened in a silent scream, revealing an orange light glowing deep in his throat, as if he were about to breathe fire.

Malakai caught up and skidded to a stop. "Darien, *get back!*" he thundered. He grabbed Darien by the shoulders and yanked him away, dragging them both to their asses. "He's a bomb!" he bellowed. "*He's a FUCKING BOMB!*"

“Magic!” Darien shouted, scrambling to his feet. This time, it was *his* turn to haul Malakai away, pushing him deeper into the warehouse, the both of them nearly tripping over their own boots and the briefcases that were scattered across the floor. “Magic, *magic*! USE YOUR MAGIC!”

They snapped their shields into place at the last second, black and gray magic melding together to form a shimmering wall.

The man exploded. Even with their magic protecting them, they were blown off their feet with a blast of fire and light.

Darien hit the warehouse ceiling with a *bang* that rattled his bones. The rafters shook, and the lights burst, plunging the whole building into darkness. The skids of crates and briefcases were smashed into smithereens, aura magic coloring the air with a rainbow haze.

Gravity sucked him back down before he could catch his breath.

He hit the cement floor with a crunch of glass, chemicals and debris showering down around him.

Minutes passed. Minutes, and he couldn’t move, not one twitch of a finger. He could barely breathe. Smoke filled up his lungs and plugged his airways, choking him.

There was a ringing in his ears. A trickle of blood ran from both nostrils, both ears. Even his mouth tasted metallic, and when he slowly lifted his head, he saw a pool of red on the cement, dribbling off his chin.

Blinking against the fog threatening to close in on him, he glanced about, grasping for his bearings.

Small fires were burning around where the body had been. A hole had been blown in the floor, and the door had literally broken off the tracks, the metal warped. Most of the walls and roof were still intact, the spells keeping them from fully coming down. The fires made it slightly easier to see as Darien staggered to his feet, gritting his teeth against the deep ache in every muscle. Every bone.

“Malakai?” he called, limping through the wreckage. For a moment, he didn’t recognize his own voice, he was that messed up. It sounded far away, the ringing in his ears nearly swallowing it right up. Everything was coated in a shimmering wash of sepia, every object desaturated and blurred. His body felt like it was floating as he staggered through the warehouse. It was the same feeling he got when he dreamed vividly and couldn’t move fast enough, couldn’t think coherently.

He caught sight of a boot near the west wall.

Stumbling over to it, wincing in pain, his right foot dragging more than the left, he started pushing wood and rock and warped metal off Malakai’s unmoving form.

“Don’t be dead,” Darien panted. But his chest was too still, his

features too slack. "Don't be dead, you stupid asshole."

The Reaper coughed. He pressed a hand to his forehead, chest shaking with a breath—another shot at life. "What the fuck, man."

"Thank the gods," Darien gasped, bending over to brace his hands on his knees. The ground lurched beneath his feet, as if he were standing on a ship in the middle of an ocean, waters chopped up by a storm.

"I didn't know you liked me that much," Malakai wheezed around a lungful of smoke. He sat up, blinking fiercely.

"I don't," Darien said. "But aside from me, you're the toughest son of a bitch in this city."

Malakai waved the smoke and dust out of his face. "Help me up."

Darien took his hand and pulled him to his feet. Both of them were covered in so much dust and ash, they were gray with it, their faces bloody and charred.

"Well," Darien said, swallowing a mouthful of blood, "that didn't go as planned."

"We gotta do that more often," Malakai panted, dusting his hands on his filthy jeans. "That was the best sleep I've had in years." He glanced about. "What the hell happened, anyway?"

Wiping blood off his mouth with the back of his ripped glove, Darien strode over to where the body had been, every step a little easier to take than before. Thank god for his ability to heal quickly. There was nothing left of the hellseher now; his body had fully disintegrated, along with the man's clothes.

A flash of silver caught Darien's eye. He bent, wincing as his back muscles spasmed, and picked up a small silver square from where it was hidden under a burst pipe. Pinching the object between his thumb and forefinger, he turned, still crouching, and held it up, showing Malakai. "This was what he used. *This* is why he exploded."

Malakai's brows pulled together, causing the wound in one of them to ooze blood. "I'm not following."

"It's an emergency weapon, like the one the other guy used. A means of committing suicide before anyone can make you talk. He had this in his mouth, and he bit down on it when we cornered him."

"Shit." Malakai braced his hands on bent knees, looking just as pained and exhausted as Darien felt. "And I guess he meant for us to follow him to hell, didn't he?"

"Probably." On Gaven's strict instruction. The only thing the prick hadn't seemed to anticipate, or perhaps had been too cocky to worry about, was losing all his valuable stock in the process.

"What do you want on your gravestone?" Malakai asked.

Darien blinked. "What?"

"Like, engraved. What do you want it to say?"

“What are you talking about?”

“When Gaven kills you.”

“Fuck you!” Darien snapped, shooting to his feet. Malakai wore an evil grin. “Let’s get out of here.”

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Four hours later, Darien stood in the destroyed warehouse in the Black Alder District, Gaven and his men surrounding him. Gaven had summoned him as soon as he’d received word of his warehouse having been blown up, the stock inside it obliterated. The guards that had been on watch duty at one o’clock were lying dead in a row on the floor, a bullet in each of their skulls, courtesy of Gaven. Puddles of scarlet bled across the cement, seeping toward Darien’s boots.

“Let this serve as a reminder,” Gaven said, his words for Darien and the few men Gaven hadn’t seen a need to kill, as he peeled his bloody gloves off his smooth hands, “of what will happen if you fuck up.” He shoved his gloves into his pants pocket and barked to his men, “I want to know who did this! Check every camera in the goddamn area. I don’t care what you have to do, you find them and you bring them to me!”

Half of them departed at once, the other half staying, standing completely still as they awaited instructions from Gaven. Darien was careful to keep his face empty of expression, careful not to look anywhere—least of all at the spot where he’d hit the floor after being blasted to the ceiling, the spot on the cement where he’d had to scrub his blood clean.

“And you,” Gaven seethed, rounding on a heel to face Darien. Darien lifted his chin as Gaven looked him over with a hateful gaze that could burn. A minute passed. One really fucking long minute before he said to his remaining men, “Grab him.”

Darien wasted no time reacting. His magic swept out in a dusky wave that was both visible and tangible, the sight of it striking Gaven and the others dumb. Eyes solid black, he held Gaven’s men still, lifting them up off the ground so their feet dangled uselessly in the air, their hands going to their throats, their airways pinched shut by Darien’s hold, every wisp of oxygen cut off.

When Darien spoke, he kept his voice low and firm. “If anyone so much as breathes on me, Gaven, I swear to the gods I will end you all so fast. You seem to be forgetting that you chose to work with Darien fucking Cassel. Regretting that decision yet?”

Three minutes passed. Three minutes, all of which Darien counted in his head, as no one moved, and Gaven’s men continued to struggle for air like fish washed up on land. Faces turned purple, and necks



bled as fingernails clawed into flesh, desperate for air.

When Gaven spoke, there was a note of fear in his words. "Let them down." His throat bobbed with a swallow.

But Darien did no such thing. "Apologize," he said coolly.

A muscle feathered in Gaven's jaw. "No."

"Apologize," Darien said again, squeezing the many hands of his magic tighter. "I don't take kindly to implications made on my level of integrity, Gaven. I am not responsible for what happened here, and I never want to hear again about how you think I might've been." One last time, he said, a smile playing on his mouth, "Apologize."

Gaven's throat shifted again, but Darien knew it was more from rage than any other emotion. Those weasel-like eyes flicked to his pathetic men, dangling like puppets in the air. "I apologize," he said stiffly.

Darien's smile grew. "Thank you." He let go of Gaven's men, and they all dropped to the floor, gasping for oxygen.

Gaven had enough balls left to step forward, so close that he was only inches from Darien. "Another screw-up from anyone, I don't care who it is, and you can consider yourself a dead man, Darien fucking Cassel." He sneered around Darien's name, lip pulling back over his teeth.

Darien smiled. "I look forward to seeing what you think you can do to me if that day ever comes."

Gaven grabbed the shoulder of his jacket in a fist and pulled him in close. "If you are fucking with me, Cassel," he said, voice low, "I'm going to break you."

"Reality check," Darien hissed, leaning in closer. So close, he smelled the fear in Gaven's blood, his aura thrumming with the color of it, despite his actions. "You can't break someone who's already broken."

He pulled himself free of Gaven's hold and walked away.

—

"Tanner," Darien gritted out, clutching the phone tight to his ear. He hurried for his car that was parked up the hill from the warehouse, keeping his voice quiet enough that no one, barely even Tanner, could hear what he said. "I need you to check all the camera feeds in Black Alder. Wipe them all clean, every single one, make sure there is no footage of me and Malakai or my truck—nothing."

"Everything okay?"

"Barely." He got in his car, taking one last look at the warehouse, where Gaven's men still swarmed. "I won't feel better about this mess until I know there is nothing that can trace back to us."

"I'm on it. And don't freak out, okay? You've got enough on your plate." Keys clicked in the background.

"I'll try."

"Want me to call you when I'm done?"

"Sure. I'll be at the Block tonight, so leave a message if I don't pick up, alright?"

"Meeting with Casen?"

Darien hesitated. "Yeah," he lied. Meeting with Casen sounded better than admitting that he was fighting in the worst ring in the city, ripping people apart because he couldn't handle the mess of his life. "Have you heard anything from Arthur?"

"He's still translating. He said Calanthe left some notes on the scroll, and there were a few things she mistranslated, but he wants to double check them and make sure he's right. I'll let him fill you in when he sees you. He's probably better at explaining it than I am."

"Right on," Darien said. "We should have some answers soon."

About damn time.

The rainbow swirl of Loren's magic reflected in the glossy surface of the table at Agatha's Post-Secondary Education for Botany. A seemingly endless stream of pastel colors poured from her cupped hands, sparkling and undulating like ocean waves under a clear sky. Woven between each color was a white so bright, it nearly blinded.

"I'd say you're getting the hang of this," Agatha said with a proud smile. That smile faltered a little as she studied Loren's eyes—solid white again, white lines webbing away from them. "Though I do wish you wouldn't insist on using the Venom."

"It's easier to summon my magic when I'm on it," Loren said, watching her aura dance across the wood. The plants on the sills were intrigued by the sight of it. They leaned in their pots, as if drawn to sunshine, the real rays of the sun that were slanting through the windows behind them forgotten.

"Maybe." Agatha frowned. "But you're going to have to get off it sooner than later. If you become too reliant on it, then you'll never stand a chance at learning how to control your magic without it. Dependency is a serious concern, Loren."

"I will, don't worry about me." Loren sat back in her chair and lowered her hands to the table. Her magic faded away, much to the disappointment of all the plants, who shrank in their pots and turned toward each other, as if gossiping.

Agatha glanced at her watch. "Our time is just about up for the day. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Actually, there is something I've been meaning to ask you..." Loren searched for the right words, a way to ask Agatha the most important question without tripping the spell and causing her speech to lock down. If she messed this up, she wasn't sure what she would do, especially now that she'd come this far. "Do you know anything about the Veil?" She breathed an internal sigh of relief when the question came with ease.

Agatha canted her head. "Doesn't everyone know about the Veil?"

Loren worded her next sentence just as carefully as she had her question. "I'm more interested in hearing what *you* know about it."

Agatha raised a brow, looking faintly amused. Loren was relieved that all her strange requests and questions hadn't yet pushed Agatha to contact Darien. It was a miracle, really. And she didn't bank on having it last much longer. "Don't they teach you this at AA?" Agatha

asked.

“Yes. But I wasn’t paying attention in class, and I have a test tomorrow that I know I am going to fail.” This part wasn’t actually a lie. The day Professor Griffith had been pacing in front of the chalkboard as she gave a lecture about the Crossroads was the same day Darien had texted Loren about how perfect her ass was. She found it impossible to ignore him when he was talking like that, no matter how interesting or important the lesson.

“Alright.” Agatha tossed her tumble of curly hair over a shoulder, where it draped across the table. “The Veil is a curtain between the land of the living and that of the dead. Some people believe that at twilight, as well as on the darkest night of the year, dead loved ones can communicate by means of the Crossroads, because the Veil is thinnest during these times.” She fluttered a dismissive hand. “It’s all just old stories. I wouldn’t put any stock in them.”

“And what of the living?”

Agatha pursed her lips in thought. “What of them?”

“Can they...?” Her question stuck in her throat.

Luckily, Agatha understood. “The living cannot cross over.”

“But hypothetically speaking,” Loren urged, feeling her throat threatening to tighten, “how might someone do it?”

“Hypothetically speaking,” Agatha began, looking as confused as she did frustrated, “I would talk to someone who knows the answers.”

“A creature of the Crossroads?”

She drew a slow breath in through her nose. “Or someone safer, like I don’t know...a Familiar Spirit.”

A Familiar Spirit—that was it!

A knock came at the door. They both looked its way as it groaned open, and Loren had to stop her mouth from falling open at the sight of her father standing in the doorway.

“Pardon the interruption,” he mumbled, scratching at the back of his neck. When his eyes found Loren’s, he looked as awkward as ever, scarlet spreading across his cheekbones. “I was hoping I might find you here.”

—

Loren sat with Erasmus on the bench near the babbling fountain outside of Agatha’s. She ate a granola bar, the glow of her tattoo dimming with every swallow. Luckily, it was only a bright blue, not the glaring red of a distress signal that would push her into a fainting spell.

“How did you find me?” Loren asked, biting off another chunk of the granola bar. “Were you spying on me?”

“Spying?” Her father chuckled. “Of course n-not.” He gestured to the quaint little shops and restaurants just down the street. “I come here for coffee almost every afternoon. I saw you a few days ago, and since I was in the area today, I decided to pop in and see if you were here.”

“How’s the townhouse?”

He shrugged. “Almost as good as new. I really wish Darien didn’t go and spend all that money on spells.”

Loren stuffed the last of the granola bar into her mouth and crinkled the wrapper into a fist.

“He’s a good man,” Erasmus persisted.

“The tonic didn’t work.”

Erasmus’s face hardened. “No?” he asked.

Loren shook her head. “He had an awful Surge and had to leave the house.” She sighed. “It was worth a try though.”

The tension in her father’s face melted, and he gave a slight nod, the gray streaks in his gold hair glinting in the sun. “That’s too b-bad.”

“Yeah, it is.” Loren didn’t see a wastebin anywhere around here, so she put the wrapper in her purse. She caught sight of the camera lying inside, tucked beneath her wallet. “I keep forgetting about my photo album.” She got up and took a few photos of the fountain and the school, and then she spun around on a heel to face her father. “Want your picture taken?”

Erasmus held up a hand. “No, no, I’m good. I’d rather not see myself in photos.”

“Suit yourself.” She sat back down and plunked the camera into her purse.

“If you’d like me to take one of you, I’d be happy to.”

“No, I’m good.” Loren waved him away. “I don’t like myself much in photos these days either.” She eyed up her father, who shrank away from the eye contact, fingers drumming his knees. Finally, Loren found her voice. “I wanted to apologize for how rude I was at dinner.”

Erasmus appeared surprised. “You don’t have to apologize, Loren. R-really.”

“Actually, I do. Because it made me realize that maybe you aren’t telling me anything about the Well, not because you don’t want to, but...but because you can’t.”

The look that entered her father’s eyes told her everything: she was right. She’d hit the nail on the head. Something was stopping him from speaking freely about the Arcanum Well, about her mother, about the Phoenix Head Society.

*I know how that feels*, she tried to say. But even those words refused to come out. If only he would clue in and realize the same thing was going on with her. If only he would tell Darien, so she could skip all

this extra work and apologize to him for this awful mess. She hadn't stopped thinking about him since last night, when she'd given him that flimsy excuse about being afraid of Gaven. Sooner than later, Darien would be finished dealing with that problem, and would come to her seeking answers. And by then, she'd better have the right ones, or...

Or she could lose him.

She glanced at the sun that was steadily sinking toward the horizon, deep orange rays framing the stark silhouettes of old buildings. Shops began to close, employees dragging their signs in for the day.

"I should get going before the light's gone." She stood and gathered her things. "Be safe, please. Who knows what those thieves wanted?"

"You b-be careful too."

She smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

She hopped the next city bus that stopped just up the road and returned to Angelthene Academy.

Agatha had given her an idea. An idea she hoped would work. She knew exactly where she needed to go, but it was too dangerous at this time of day, so she would go in the morning instead.

She was almost there. She could feel it.

Darien prowled like a mountain lion through the caged octagon ring of the Chopping Block, covered in blood and guts that weren't his own.

It was his fifth fight of the evening. He'd come here as soon as the arena had opened, the anger he'd felt after his screw-up at Gaven's warehouse a living thing that couldn't be quelled by anything other than bloodshed. His fifth fight, and he was the lone victor, a heap of dead bodies surrounding him as the crowd went absolutely wild. They stamped their feet and shouted, a few of them fighting among themselves, driven to violence by bets they'd lost.

The man at Darien's feet—the last to lose to him tonight—was already dead, but Darien still had some steam to blow off.

He grabbed a spiked wooden bat off the floor and ripped out a thin shard of metal. He threw himself into a crouch over the warlock and stabbed his windpipe with the shard. Again, and again, and again, and again. Blood sprayed. It splattered his face and bare chest and dripped off his hair, but he didn't feel it. He kept going, winding his arm back repeatedly, driving the piece of metal in deep—

Until Casen was banging on the cage. "HEY!" he shouted. He banged again, metal rattling. "Cassel! CASSEL!"

Darien froze, bloody shard raised in his fist, his eyes—no longer black, thank fuck—snapping to the Butcher's face.

"That's *enough!*" the Butcher shouted. "You're done. Get cleaned up and meet me outside."

Darien stood and threw the shard into the cage—right at the Butcher's face. The magic coating the enclosure zinged, bolts of it rippling. "*Are you firing me?*" Darien thundered, nostrils flaring.

"For tonight, I am," Casen replied, trench coat swaying as he walked away. "You came here to cure your insanity, not make it worse." He gestured with a large hand to the warehouse doors, barely visible above the heads bobbing in the audience. "Outside. Now."

A buzzer sounded, and the spells coating the cage faded away. One of the workers climbed up onto the roof and swung open the lone door at the top. "Let's go," said the hellseher. "You're the victor."

He was always the victor, but rarely did it feel like it.

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Darien stood with the Butcher behind the warehouses of the Umbra Forum, watching the murky lights gleam off the Angelthene River.

Fighting at the Chopping Block provided a faster relief from his Surges than the Pit. It probably helped that the men and demons he fought in that cage were harder to kill than anyone who jumped into Perez's pit, any demons that were dragged out of the storm drains.

Casen was smoking a cigar at his side, one of those top-quality imported burns sold in the market. Darien had to admit he was breathing in the silken cloud of gray on purpose for some much-needed, second-hand nicotine. He still hadn't picked up a cigarette, not even with everything going on, and he planned on keeping it that way.

Darien glanced at the Butcher. "Sorry, by the way," he mumbled. "I tend to black out when I fight. Don't really know what I'm doing all the time." Though Darien enjoyed losing himself in the dark and twisted recesses of his mind, it was sometimes a struggle to return to reality. To look around him and see the destruction he'd wrought when he'd allowed his rage to take the wheel.

"It's fine, kid," the Butcher said, waving the apology away. "I forgave you the moment you did it. Besides, I know your little performance will only increase my sales and attendance, so no harm done."

"How'd you get into this line of work, anyway?"

Casen gave a little smile as he stared off into the night. The moonlight was a milky haze on the surface of the Angelthene River, like cream dropped into coffee. "Printed off a few résumés, knocked on a few doors, had a few interviews," he joked. That smile faded. He wasn't one to smile often, but the way his features were transformed by whatever thoughts he was having in that moment... It was cold. Darien had never seen anything like it.

He waited in silence as the Butcher gathered his thoughts.

"I came home one day from my shift at a liquor store to find an eviction notice nailed to my door. The wife told me if I didn't find a way to keep a roof over our heads, she would leave me. And take little Chloe too. She was only three at the time. So, I found a new job, if you can even call it that. Soon enough, I was making a shit-ton of money and a shit-ton of enemies. The babysitter brought Chloe home one night when I was...out." He paused to swallow. "Found my wife dead on the kitchen floor. Her throat had been slit from ear to ear by a dealer that didn't like new competition in his neighborhood." There was a beat of silence, and then he said, "The guy used a knife out of one of our drawers. Cut her open like an animal at the butcher's."

*Shit.* Darien hated that he saw Loren's face in his head. Saw her



bleeding out on *his* kitchen floor, all because of something that was his fault. By people who had nothing against her and everything against him.

“Chloe was taken from me,” Casen continued. “Big surprise, right?” He smirked, eyes cold as ice. “It was for her own good.”

“I’m sorry,” Darien said. *Sorry* wasn’t a good enough word. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“She wound up in foster care. I didn’t try to fight for her because I knew she deserved better. She grew up just fine without me. Last I heard, she graduated university and got engaged to her high school sweetheart. A good guy, by the sound of it. Treats her right. Every father’s wish.” A pause, and then he repeated, “She grew up just fine without me. That’s what true love is—for me, anyway. Letting go of the people you care about if it means they’ll wind up with something better.” The words were like a knife cutting into Darien’s heart. Blood pooled in his chest, and suddenly he couldn’t breathe.

“Does she live here?” he managed to say. He inhaled through his nose, forcing himself to get a grip.

Casen shook his head. “She’s long gone. Got pulled out of this gutter as fast as possible. She and her new parents now live in Glasslight. Small town by the sea. Beautiful place.” He rubbed at his beard absently. “I don’t even know if she remembers my name.” He blinked, eyes refocusing, and turned to face him. “I hope she doesn’t. Man, I hope she fucking doesn’t.” He chuckled, but there was no humor in the laugh.

Darien had nothing to say. And even though the night was warm, he felt an icy chill seep into his bones. The pain in his chest was still there, spreading from the wellspring of his bleeding heart, a pool becoming a lake of hurt. He couldn’t erase the horrifying image of Loren’s lifeless face from his mind. He’d had his fair share of nightmares in his lifetime, but this was the worst one.

Casen gestured to the warehouses. “This is my life now. Take a good look. My family, my wife, my future. This is it. It’s all I got.” He stared at the buildings with vacant eyes, his aura adopting the shade of guilt. Of regret and sorrow.

“You ever think of quitting?” Darien asked. “Starting over somewhere new? Maybe finding Chloe again?”

He pursed his lips. “Nah. I’m in it till the grave. That’s the funny thing about underworlds like the one we’ve got here. They offer you a quick fix to all your problems but at the cost of never getting out again. It’s like selling your soul. Addicting. Damning.” Dark eyes snapped to Darien’s face. “Literal hell on earth.”

He got that right.

The Butcher was studying him. “What about you? You ever think

of getting out?" He took one last puff on the cigar before throwing it on the ground and stomping it flat.

"All the time." Since meeting Loren, he thought about it every day. Sometimes several times a day, especially since she'd walked in on him while he was...working. "What do you think? Think it's a fool's hope?"

"Most definitely." Casen began making his way back to the warehouses, reaching over to muss Darien's hair as he passed. Had anyone else done it, Darien would've smashed their hand into pieces, but he let it slide this time. "But you're no fool, kid. You're no fool."

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When Darien got home, the house was quiet and dark, the others fast asleep or out collecting.

He pulled himself up the stairs, hand gripping the rail, booted feet dragging. He didn't bother turning on any lights. He could see just fine, his hellseher vision nearly as sharp in the dark as it was during the day. Moonlight filtered through the windows and skylights, glimmering off the chandelier in the entrance hall. The ticking of various clocks filled the house. Down in the kitchen, Mortifer slept on the fridge, his quiet breathing reaching Darien from all the way up here.

Darien slowed his pace as he passed Loren's old suite. The door was ajar, the room empty. He didn't look inside. He continued down the hallway to his own suite, right next to hers.

The door was half-shut. He pushed it open, the handle hitting the wall with a dull thud.

For a long time, he stared into the dark and vacant room. The place felt cold, just like his heart. He'd hardly slept since Loren left, and whenever he did sleep it was usually when he passed out from exhaustion on one of the couches downstairs. Not a single night had been spent in this bed since she'd left. The sheets were still rumpled from when she'd last slept in them, her slippers still under the bed, untouched. A sliver of moonlight cut through the spotless glass of the mirror on the wall, drawing attention to his torn expression, the tension in his stance.

He destroyed the mirror first.

Quick as a strike of lightning, he crossed the room, shattering the glass with his fists. Animalistic roars tore out of him as he struck, shards cutting open his knuckles, tiny bits of the mirror slicing into his cheeks and neck. He completely obliterated his reflection, crushing every shard of glass with his fists and boots, until nothing but fine dust remained.

By the time he'd moved onto the curtain rods, ripping them right out of the walls, screws and bolts flying through the room, he blacked out.

He didn't come to again until he was thumping down the staircase, chest heaving with frantic breaths. Blood dripped from the stinging wounds in his hands, staining the carpet.

He passed out on the couch in the library. Even while he slept, his heart didn't slow. It pounded so hard it woke him up several times throughout the long night, his whole chest aching as if all that glass he'd shattered was embedded in his lungs. The sun took forever to rise. As soon as it was up, he would be out of here again.

It was the worst night he'd had in months. The worst night he'd lived through since wrecking his date with Loren under the stars.

This house didn't feel like a home anymore, now that she was gone.

It was barely eight a.m. when Loren made it to Mordred and Penelope's.

As soon as she got there, she unlocked the shop, hurried across the cluttered floor, past the curious plants who turned in their pots to watch her, and slipped out the back door. Luckily, Mordred and Penelope, who were working today's shift, had not yet arrived. If they saw her here, they would surely ask a bunch of nosy questions she couldn't answer.

She called for another taxi, telling the starter who answered to get the driver to pick her up in the alley behind the apothecary, the lane barely wide enough for a single vehicle.

"You want to be picked up in the alley?" the woman on the other end asked, gum smacking in her teeth. Phones trilled in the background.

"Yes," Loren said, keeping her voice down. The cooks who worked the kitchen in the Golden Onion—the restaurant beside the apothecary—were beginning their food prep, the aroma of sautéed onion and garlic floating through cracked—open windows. "Just tell him I'll be waiting for him behind Mordred and Penelope's."

There was a pause. And then the starter said, "Alright. He should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you." She hung up, turned off the device, and slipped it into her pocket.

Coming here first was one extra step in her day, but she wouldn't risk the imperator's men, who had tailed her the whole way here, learning about her real destination. This was the safest way to go about this, even if it was a waste of time and extra cab fare.

She waited in that narrow alley, Singer standing at her side. Rosy sunlight streamed between the buildings in the distance. It glimmered off windows and cars zipping around the block, the cadences of different engines mingling together to create a piece of urban music that floated through the streets.

As Loren waited, she shed her white cardigan and tied it around her waist. Another day of unpredictable weather in a wildly unpredictable city. Even Singer was panting, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

She heard Mordred and Penelope arrive to open the apothecary. Their voices drifted through the windows of the staff room way up top.

When they slid one of those windows open, Loren flattened herself against the scorching wall of the alley. The twins were watering Mr. Crispy. One of his loose leaves fluttered down, where it landed on the back step, not far from where Loren stood.

A moment later, the twins vanished downstairs. Loren was careful to keep away from the tiny window in the back door.

“I don’t suppose you know anything about the Veil,” she said to Singer as she fanned the droplets of perspiration on her face. Pedestrians walked by the mouth of the alley, carrying frozen coffees and iced teas in plastic cups marked with the logo of the Terra Café. “Do you, buddy?”

Singer peeked at her with one glowing eye, a low whine slipping through his chops.

“That’s okay. We’ll figure it out.” She snapped her fingers. “Let’s get you back inside my shadow before we spook the driver.” She was still careful to keep Singer hidden whenever she went out alone; the last thing she wanted was to draw attention to herself, and a human with a Familiar was sure to draw the wrong kind. Luckily, Ethan and his pals had said nothing about Singer to the other students at AA, at least as far as she knew, nor had they bothered her since that night at the pool. But she had the feeling it wasn’t the last time she would have to deal with them.

With a wag of his tail, Singer melted into her shadow that was slanted across the baking pavement.

A minute later, a taxi turned into the alley. Loren stepped aside to give the driver room as he rolled up, brakes squeaking as he stopped the car. She got in the back and buckled her seatbelt, praying with all her might that the house would be empty when she got there.

“What’s the address?” the human driver asked as he turned down the radio and cranked the air conditioning as high as it could go. The local station was discussing a strange weather phenomenon, but she didn’t have a chance to hear what it was.

“775237 Victoria Amazonica District.”

—

When Loren reached the front steps of Hell’s Gate, it felt like a lot longer than seven days had passed since she’d set foot on the property. As she stared at the closed front door, her heart was weighed down by a feeling she didn’t quite understand, a sadness that made it a challenge to move her feet from where they were planted.

This was her home, and she never wanted that to change. Ever.

With a steadying breath that filled her lungs up with the scent of jasmine and creosote, she stepped up to the door and unlocked it, moving as quietly as she could.

Darien's car wasn't here, and neither was Max's SUV. The jeep Ivy and Jack shared was usually parked outside, but it wasn't here either. She couldn't see inside the colossal garage to check for any of the other vehicles, but she was banking on her memory of the rough schedules the Devils all kept, holding out hope that no one, not even Tanner the homebody, was here.

When she stepped into the entrance hall, her lungs greedily sucked down the scents of her home: the spicy fragrance of the flowers on the glass table, the lingering aromas of brewed espresso and freshly peeled oranges, the fabric softener Ivy always bought. It was funny—the things a person noticed about a place after being gone for a while.

"Anybody home?" she called quietly.

No one answered. The only sound in the house was the crunch of ice between shadowy little teeth.

*Crunch. Crunch. Swallow. Snap. Crunch. Crunch. Swallow.*

Loren walked into the kitchen, standing on her tiptoes to see the top of the fridge as she approached. The Hob's back was facing her, his form nearly invisible in the shadows cast by the cupboards above the fridge, not to mention the plethora of cereal boxes surrounding him like the walls of a cardboard castle.

Loren smiled. "Can you chew a little quieter, please?"

Mortifer froze. Slowly, so slowly that it was overboard dramatic, he turned to look at her, his cranberry-colored eyes narrowing into slits. And then, just as slowly, he took another ice chip from his pile on the fridge and stuffed it in his mouth, exaggerating every movement. Eyes on her, he bit down hard, every pointed tooth showing. *Crunch!*

Loren rolled her eyes. "I was kidding, don't be so serious." Mortifer kept glaring, a low snarl slithering between his teeth. "I'm wondering if you might be able to help me with something."

He stopped chewing. Stopped snarling. Curiosity shone in his eyes, and he twisted his small head to one side like a pigeon.

"Can you speak?" She'd never heard him speak before, never heard him make any sound, other than a hiss or a snarl, and on rare occasions when he was really upset, a cry that sounded an awful lot like a bleating sheep. Usually, he reserved those cries for Darien, and usually they involved tattling on Bandit's bad behavior. But maybe...

Her eyes snagged on the small whiteboard and dry erase markers that were secured to the side of the fridge with magnets. Ivy had written some food items on the board with the purple marker; hopefully she had them memorized, because Loren would soon be

erasing them.

Loren grabbed the board and the black marker off the fridge and looked up at Mortifer. "Can you write?"

The Hob wiped his wet hands on his shadowy legs and climbed down from the fridge.

—

Ten minutes later, they were standing in the backyard, staring into a wide hole in the ground below a tree, the broad canopy shading a large portion of the vibrant green lawn.

"You want me to climb in there?" Loren asked. She looked down at Mortifer, who stood near her ankle, whiteboard and marker in miniature hand. The whiteboard was bigger than him.

He scribbled something down, his fingers barely wrapping all the way around the marker, the tip of it squeaking as he pressed way harder than he needed to. He put the cap back on the pen and held the whiteboard up so she could read it.

*Weak spot in Divide*, he'd written.

Great. As if one weak spot into Spirit wasn't bad enough, there was one right in their very own backyard. The air was slightly cooler here, just like that spot in the library, where she had caused a blip in time, freezing the hands on the clock.

The library... Loren's lip jutted out in thought as she assessed the mouth in the ground, the hollow place only about three feet deep. Had the creature that had attacked them somehow come through the Veil after she'd blown up that girl's cup?

Loren shook the thought away and focused on the task at hand. "Will I end up in Spirit?" she asked the Hob. The spell stopped her from saying the full name: Spirit Terra.

Mortifer wrote something down and then flipped the board up. *In—between*, it said.

Loren's forehead creased. "In—between? Like inside the Divi—" Her damned tongue froze again.

But Mortifer understood. He nodded, the black flames that made up his head rippling in the buttery sunlight streaming through the yard.

She didn't really like the sound of that. When she entered Spirit Terra with the imperator, it was only a matter of two steps and she was inside that realm. If she ended up in the Divide...she didn't know what to expect, what it would look like, or how she would find her way back out again. How far would she have to travel until she got all the way into Spirit? What was it like inside the Divide? Would she risk dying the same way she would risk it if she were to enter Spirit

without a Life Clock?

She had two syringes to use, both of them in the back pocket of her jeans. She hoped there was enough time on them combined to keep her alive until she could get back out again.

Loren stepped closer to the tree. "What do I do?" That unnatural cold raised a shiver on her arms. This corner of the massive yard was quiet; no birds chirped here, like they did in the jasmine shrubs and palm trees. It reminded her of the Widow's habitat and the Chalk Door, two places stuck between worlds. Two places lacking the vibrancy of the land of the living.

Mortifer climbed down into the hole, nimbly sliding down the rough roots protruding through the soil, and stretched his arm into the shadows under the base of the tree. Loren blinked in astonishment as she watched his hand disappear, nothing left in its place but rainbow sparks floating through the darkness like multicolored fireflies. The sparks formed the vague shape of his hand.

She crouched down beside him and copied him.

But her hand didn't change. No colored sparks appeared.

Mortifer scrubbed the whiteboard clean. *Concentrate*, he wrote. He had surprisingly good handwriting, even if he *was* crushing the tip of the marker into a stub.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes. She pretended she was back at Agatha's, conduit cupped before her. Without any Venom in her bloodstream to aid the summoning of her magic, she thought of Darien, thought of everything she loved about him. She thought of how important his life was, how badly she wanted to protect him. Love wasn't a great enough word for how she felt about him. She would die for him—would protect him with everything she had to offer, no matter how small or insignificant. Nothing mattered as much as his safety, his wellbeing. His future. Even if he believed he wasn't worthy of one, wasn't worthy of a better path than the one he'd walked his whole life. He deserved it all, and she would help him get there someday, no matter what it might cost her.

When she opened her eyes, her conduit was glowing.

She reached for the shadows beneath the tree, Darien's face still in her mind. This time, her fingers and palm tingled, the tips of the former disappearing into sparks all shades of the rainbow.

A shaky laugh slipped out of her. "This is crazy."

Without allowing herself to get scared of what might be lurking in the world beyond this tree, she took one of the syringes out of her pocket, pushed her thick hair to one shoulder, and emptied its contents into her bloodstream, ignoring the prick of the needle in her neck. When she was finished, she stuck the cap on the syringe and placed it and the other on the lawn, remembering what Calanthe had



told her about the Life Clocks not lasting beyond the Divide.

And then she crawled forward...down below the tree roots, the cool moisture from the soil seeping through her jeans. Her whole body tingled as it dissolved into white and rainbow sparks...

And then she fell head—first into the Divide.

Loren tumbled feet over head, as if she were falling down a rabbit hole, the backyard of Hell's Gate vanishing into swirling slate mist. Every trace of sunlight and the world she knew disappeared, and in its place was only darkness. It swirled around her, infinite and cold.

A moment later, she landed with a splash of water she couldn't see or feel—she could only hear the noise it made upon contact.

She scrambled to her feet, grateful to have Mortifer at her side. The black roots of the tree hung above her head, the only visible part of it, the trunk and branches gone. Those roots were too high up for her to reach, too far to climb back up.

Slowly, she turned...

Her mouth dropped open at the sight of the endless black surrounding her, stretching on and on and on forever.

Being inside the Divide felt like floating through space. There were tiny pinpricks of light that reminded her of stars, most of them white or silver, a few of them gold. Glittering dust motes were suspended in the air, broken up here and there by different colored orbs that bobbed away every time she reached for one.

She looked down at Mortifer, who still had the whiteboard in his hands, thankfully. "What do we do now?" The words traveled far and wide, the metallic echo of them startling her.

He merely shrugged.

"Where, exactly, are we?"

He wrote down a handful of words and turned the whiteboard around. *Not far from Crossroads.*

Loren was too afraid to ask which one.

She started walking. Mortifer kept good pace with her, his webbed feet soundless. Singer watched from her shadow—the shadow she couldn't see in here. She sensed he was too spooked to venture out.

*It's okay, buddy, she told him. We'll be fine.*

Everything looked the same. She was beginning to lose her bearings and her sense of time when she caught sight of something glowing from underneath the ground up ahead. There was a hole there—a pit about twelve feet in diameter. When she dared to venture closer, she saw layers of gauzy spider silk covering the opening. The glow came from something deep inside. It was faintly blue, the light very soft.

Loren nudged closer, toeing the edge of the pit, endless dark swirling around her. Tiny stars brushed against her arms and clung to

her skin like static electricity.

Carefully, she crouched down and peered through the webs, but they were too thick to see what lay beyond. Among the webs was a latticework of black tree roots. Her hair was floating, and those tiny stars clung to every part of her now, like a coat of light.

She was about to stand back up, using her hands to push off her knees, when her foot slipped off the edge, and she fell on her ass, gravity yanking her down feet-first and straight into the pit. Her stomach plummeted through her feet as she was sucked down and down and down, tree roots lashing her cheeks and neck, spiderwebs and long-dead insects adhering to her skin and catching in her hair.

The plunge was over before she had a chance to scream. Water broke her fall, but it was so shallow it did little to cushion the impact. She could feel bruises forming in her flesh as her limbs connected with ground that did not yield.

Mortifer appeared beside her with a puff of smoke, a look of concern on his face. But the moment he glanced around, he shrank behind her, tiny hand grasping the back of her shirt.

Once Loren had gathered her bearings, she pushed herself up in an elbow-high pool, coughing out a mouthful of rancid water. The taste of it made her retch, but she was soon forgetting all about it as her surroundings spread before her.

There was a stone wishing fountain several feet away. Coated in moss and grime, it was smack dab in the middle of the room, the walls of that room curved and windowless. Skulls, bones, and opaque sheets of shimmering webs surrounded her, the latter covering nearly everything in sight. On the other side of the fountain, tucked into a narrow alcove, was a tall shadow. A shadow that seemed deeply perturbed, the tension in her eight long and slender legs screaming that she was more than a little annoyed by the interruption.

“It’s not every day I’m lucky enough to be startled out of a dead sleep,” said the giant spider. She shifted, pebbles clacking down from her resting space. They plunked into the water, one after another, the sound reverberating from all sides. The ghostly light in the room—the faint glow that didn’t seem to have a source—reflected faintly in the Widow’s many eyes as she recognized the human who’d stumbled into her home. “Why, if it isn’t Liliana Sophronia. How did a delicious little human like you get in here without offering blood?”

Loren pushed to her feet, ignoring the slimy texture of the floor beneath her palms. A soup of moss, sludge, excrement, and probably blood. “Pardon the interruption,” Loren said, clothes dripping. “I don’t really know how I got in here.”

The Widow shifted again. This time, Loren sensed the creature’s movements had less to do with annoyance and more to do with her

curiosity being piqued.

"You must tell me," the spider urged. "For thousands of years, I have lived here. From the moment I was birthed from shadow, fire, and blood, I have dwelled in this fountain, and not once have I had a visitor that did not have to knock before entering. Did you cut your palm, child? Had you thrown the bucket into the fountain, I surely would have heard."

Loren shook her head. "No, I...I didn't do either of those things. I was walking through darkness and then I...I sort of fell."

There was a moment of silence as the spider watched her with many eyes. "This darkness—what was it like?"

Loren chewed her lip, trying to find a way to answer the Widow's question that wouldn't be hindered by the spell. "Shimmery in appearance and silky in feel. Almost like a...a curtain."

"A veil." The Widow gave the closest resemblance to a nod that a spider could manage. "You have your mother's gift, child."

A chill prickled on the back of her neck. "My mother?" The question rippled far and wide. "Who was she? Did you know her?"

The Widow tsked. "I cannot speak of such things, Liliana Sophronia. And calling me by my name will not change my answer."

"Is there anything you *can* tell me? I know it isn't your fault that your knowledge cannot always be shared, but I am tired of metaphors and riddles." They were exhausting. She wanted answers, and she felt like she was going in circles. What bothered her the most was knowing there was an answer for everything—an explanation for all things that existed, and had ever existed. She just didn't know how to get them.

"I can tell you of the Veil," the spider offered. "The Divide."

Loren straightened. Any answers, no matter what they were concerning, she would be more than grateful to receive. She had to figure out how to find the Well, how to move through the many Veils on her own, how to bring Darien into Spirit Terra to show him what was going on. But without being able to word her questions, those answers wouldn't come easily.

When the Widow spoke, Loren clung to every word. "It is the curtain between your world and the spirit world. It is a stitching—a seam, if you will. Along the seam, there are weak spots, like the holes between buttons sewn onto a shirt, or the tiny pinprick of a needle puncturing fabric. Places where it is easier to slip through. Places where the dead may cross to the land of the living, or the living to the dead, if they are foolish enough to dare."

Loren's mind flashed back to that day in history class, when she hadn't paid attention to Professor Griffith's lesson. On the chalkboard, she had drawn three circles with an oval cutting across all three.

Was the oval supposed to be the Veil?

As she pictured it, she realized she'd seen a similar symbol before.

The logo of Lucent Enterprises.

"You said I have my mother's gift," Loren began. "What is the gift?"

"The ability to move within and through the Veil. To cross over. You can move as if you are a part of both sides of one coin. You belong neither here nor there, just as she had no real place in the universe, no true home, one foot in life and the other in death. She was the key, the turning of metal that split two worlds, and she has passed that responsibility onto you. You are the only child born directly from the *prima materia* in its purest form, therefore the universe and all things in it recognize you as belonging to them. You *are* the *prima materia*, therefore you can manipulate it, become it, make it anything you want. You can melt through walls or ground or mountains—"

"Melt through walls?"

"Again," the Widow said with patience. "You are made from the Well. You are a part of the universe and everything in it."

"How can I control it? I've been trying to learn, but...well, it hasn't been easy."

"I'm sure you've heard the phrase 'Practice makes perfect.' There is no shortcut; you just have to learn."

"How are you telling me this? The last time I was here, you were unable to answer most of my questions."

"Because the magic cloaking your origin depended entirely on you discovering where you came from on your own."

"Are you able to tell me anything else?" Loren pressed. "Anything at all? My father, he...I tried to ask him about the Well, and about... well, everything. But I believe he is unable to speak freely to me."

"I am afraid the limited information I am allowed to share with you has run out, Lilita Sophronia," the spider said. Loren's shoulders sank. "But I would advise you to listen to your father. You will find your answers in time."

Loren sighed. "Yeah, in time. I'm pretty sure that's exactly what he said." Her next words were out before she could stop them. "I paid a visit to the Pale Man about a week ago. He told me... He made a prediction."

"One that involved a death," the spider said, her voice hushed.

"Yes." Loren swallowed. "Was it true?"

"The Pale Man cannot lie." The statement was a swift blow to Loren's chest. "But the future is not set in stone," the spider added. No. No, it wasn't, and Loren would cling to this fact forever. "You, however..."

Loren stiffened. "What?"

"Well, I hate to say this, Liliana, but...you are not meant for him." If Loren thought it felt like her chest had been struck a moment ago, it was nothing compared to how she felt now. "You should leave while you have a chance, sweet child. The two of you are fighting against chains very unlikely to be broken, and in fighting the natural course of things, you risk disappointment and tragedy. My advice to you is to leave now. Leave, and stop breaking your own heart."

"I *am* meant for him." Her words were sharp, and they echoed. "I am, and I don't care what you or anyone else says. Is it because I'm human? Is that why you speak such heartless nonsense?"

"That is exactly why."

"I've heard enough. I didn't ask for that information, and I ask for nothing more from you." She glanced around. Mortifer was clinging to her ankle, his face hidden behind her leg. With reluctance to ask the Widow anything more, she bit out, "How do I get out of here?"

"The same way you came in," the Widow replied, a sparkle in her eyes. She seemed to be leaning forward, as if eager.

"Easier said than done," Loren muttered. "Can't I just cut my hand or something?"

The Widow merely watched her.

Loren drummed her fingers on her thighs. "Melt through walls... Melt through walls." She stepped up to the closest wall, the only area that wasn't completely covered in spiderwebs, and flattened her hand on its cool surface. She paused, turning to look at the Widow. "You said our chains are unlikely to be broken," Loren said. "*Unlikely*. You didn't say there was no chance."

The spider considered her words for several minutes. When she spoke, Loren detected an air of pity in her childlike voice. "There is a chance, though slim. And even if you succeed, it will not end well for both of you. No matter which path you choose, Liliana, it will end in death." Loren was too afraid to ask whose death, so she turned away, eager to get out of here.

Shutting her eyes tight, she willed her magic to wake up. As soon as she felt that same familiar heat pooling through her chest, she concentrated harder, picturing Darien's face in her mind, hanging off her memory of that smile she loved so much, that dimple in his cheek, those steel eyes crinkling up at the outer corners with a level of unrestrained joy he reserved just for her.

Two seconds later, she felt a sensation comparable to when she fell asleep at night and jolted awake, her body pitching toward ground in her imagination—

Her physical form melted away, leaving only her sparkling aura behind. She plummeted through the Divide, Mortifer falling with her,

darkness swirling around them.

There was a scraping noise. Cold stone was suddenly ripping into her clothes and skin, the back of her head thumping on a solid surface. She felt like she was at a playground, zipping feet-first down a steep slide.

The place where she landed was dusty and smelled of ash. A cloud of black and gray that was nothing like the Veil exploded around her as her ass hit something solid, the impact bruising her tailbone. When the dust finally settled—ash, she realized—she saw that she was back in Hell's Gate. In the fireplace.

Coughing, eyes burning, Loren looked up to see Tanner gaping at her, his mouth full of donut. He was standing in the kitchen—by himself, thank the Star. Well, aside from his wolf Familiar. Silver looked just as confused as Tanner, ears erect. As silence stretched on, Silver looked up at Tanner, a whimper that begged for answers slipping through his whiskery chops.

"Why are you in the fireplace?" Tanner demanded. A crumb fell off his donut. Silver slurped it up off the floor, forgetting all about those answers he'd wanted a moment ago as his big tongue dampened the wood. "Do I need to call Darien?"

She got up and dusted the soot off her soiled clothes. She stank—horribly. "If you call him, I'm taking those donuts away." Mortifer ducked under her arm and scampered away, slipping the whiteboard and marker under the couch on his way to the fridge.

Looking thoroughly offended, Tanner snatched up the box of donuts from Whisking Witch and clutched it to his chest.

"I mean it," she warned.

Tanner merely bit off another bite of donut and walked away, box tucked under his arm, Silver following on his heels.

Loren tiptoed across the rug, being careful not to leave any dirt behind. "Thank you," she whispered to Mortifer. He peered at her from between two boxes of cereal, a new pile of ice chips already set before him. "Please don't tell anyone about today. It's...it's for Darien's safety."

Mortifer used his index finger to draw two letters in the air: O.K.

"Thank you," she said again.

As soon as Loren was in the bathroom in her old suite, she stripped down and cranked the shower on, turning the temperature as hot as it could go. She scrubbed her hair and body, erasing every trace of the Widow's habitat, suds splashing the shower floor.

When she was finished, she threw her clothes in her bag, along with the syringes she'd retrieved from the backyard. The scent of the Crossroads made it too risky to leave her clothes here. She blow-dried her hair and dressed in a clean shirt and jeans she found in her

dresser, and then she hurried down the hallway to Darien's suite.

She froze in the doorway.

The giant gilt mirror on the wall beside the bed was smashed. A dusting of glass slivers covered the bed and floor. The curtains had been torn off their rods, nails and screws ripped out of the walls. The dresser drawers had been thrown open, most of their contents draped over the edges. A few clothing items were scattered across the floor, as if hurled by an angry hand.

None of those clothes were hers. Not a single article. All of them were Darien's, as if he couldn't bear to look at his things and had debated throwing everything out.

"Oh my god," Loren whispered, a sound that resembled a sob climbing up her throat. Singer crept out of her shadow without a sound. He ventured into the room on careful paws, bushy tail drooping. Even though Darien wasn't around to hear her, Loren still found an apology slipping out of her. "I'm so sorry."

There was no way of telling when he'd done this, no way of telling how many nights he'd spent away from here, all this glass in their bed deeming it unfit to be slept in. The sight of it crushed Loren's heart. A rush of tears filled her eyes, her throat squeezing tight.

She was going to fix this. Tonight. But there was one thing she needed, and that was one more Life Clock.

Being careful not to step on glass or nails, she hurried into the walk-in closet and threw on one of Darien's zip-up hoodies, breathing in his scent that lingered in the fabric.

With one last look at the destroyed suite, she grabbed her bags and headed downstairs, phone in hand. She found Klay's number in her recent conversations and hit CALL.

His stupid, annoying voice scraped through the speaker after the second ring. "What."

"Tell your father that I am ready. But this time, we play by *my* rules."

Another dead vampire had turned up in Werewolf Territory. Ripped to shreds, just like the others. Just like Calanthe. Logan was about to lose his mind, and Darien didn't blame him.

He stood with Logan in the kitchen of his home in the Silverwood District, the tiny room a lot cleaner than the last time he was here. No wolf heart stinking up the sink, no leaning towers of trash bags, no food stuck to the floor.

Logan's sister Chrysantha was here too. She was staring into space at the kitchen table, arms crossed on the scratched surface, dark hair an unbrushed mess. Chrysantha had hardly said anything since Darien arrived. Darien knew her silence had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the vampire she was in love with. Emilie, who, according to Logan, hadn't spoken to her in weeks.

"Any ideas?" Logan said. He was leaning against the counter by the stove, large hands wrapped around a mug that said *Big Bad Alpha*.

"I have a few," Darien replied. "The most obvious reason I can think of would be..." He inclined his head toward Chrysantha, who didn't stir or even blink. Her fire-colored eyes were glazed over, the sleeves of her baggie sweatshirt pulled up over her brown fingers.

Logan's face smoothed with an epiphany. "Chrysantha?"

She looked up at the sound of her voice, blinking rapidly as if waking from a dream.

Darien explained his theory to Logan. "Calanthe only allied with you—with us—to try to find the Well. She was never tolerant of her daughter getting together with a werewolf. My first thought was that these murders have something to do with Emilie and Chrysantha."

"But Calanthe's dead," Logan said. "Didn't you hear? If she's dead, then how can she be behind these murders?"

"I believe she was trying to start a war but ended up being killed before she could finish it." A war to end the werewolves of Angelthene to make sure her beloved daughter would inherit her throne without fighting it—without running away from her responsibilities to be with the werewolf she loved. The plan was abhorrent, but so was Calanthe.

Logan set down his mug, his hands faintly trembling with the threat of the shift. "Who do you think killed her?"

"Her half-son is back in town."

Two pairs of sun-colored eyes locked on Darien's face.

The next question came from Chrysantha. "You believe Jaden



killed his own mother?" she asked.

"If he had a good enough motive for doing it, then yes," Darien replied, "I do believe that."

"And what motive would that be?" Logan asked.

"The same one Calanthe had: the Well. More power. No more risk of getting the Tricking. Not only that, but I wouldn't put it past him to want the Head Seat at the Blood Rose, and now that he's back and has reached the age of inheritance, it rightfully goes to him, not Emilie."

"Shit." Logan ran a hand through his tangled hair. "What—"

A frantic knock came at the door. *Bang. Bang. Bang!*

Darien looked at the front door just as Logan looked at him. When Logan didn't move, arms vibrating harder, Darien headed for the door, his response spurring Logan to follow him.

They opened it to find none other than Emilie Croft standing on the front porch.

—

"He tried to kill me," Emilie said, her pale hand drifting to the bruises and silver burn marks on her throat. The vampire and the two wolves were seated at the kitchen table, Emilie beside Chrysantha, Darien the only one standing. "My mother is gone, and without her there to protect me, my brother has turned into a tyrant. He wants to make sure I have no claim on his seat."

"Asshole," Chrysantha snarled, sunset eyes flashing. She had been nothing but attentive to Emilie since the moment she'd stepped over the threshold. The werewolf had taken one look at the wounds on Emilie's neck and nearly gone completely berserk. Even now, minutes later, Chrysantha's whole body was still vibrating with the threat of the shift, much like her brother's.

"You can stay with us, Em," Logan said. "Until all this blows over."

Chrysantha threw her brother a grateful look.

"Emilie," Darien began. The vampire looked up at him with blood-red eyes. "I know you're rattled right now, but do you have any idea what's happening with these dead vampires that keep turning up?"

The dimples in Emilie's cheeks deepened with a frown. "Has there been another?" She glanced between the two wolves.

"This morning," Chrysantha said. "Another one ripped to shreds near Black Mirror Pond."

Logan added, "One of the only areas in the district that's so secluded, it doesn't have street cameras."

"Convenient," Darien muttered.

"Jaden has been very careful not to speak of anything around me," Emilie began. "But my mother had plans involving Silverwood. She

didn't fill me in on what they were, but I figured they had something to do with her aversion for wolves." Her small shoulders pulled up into a shrug. "It's one of the only possible explanations for this."

Logan glanced at Darien. "Smart cookie," he muttered.

Darien smirked. "Maybe I should become a detective."

Emilie continued, "I expected the murders to stop as soon as she was gone, but..."

"But they've continued," Chrysantha finished for her, taking the vampire's milk-white hand into both of hers.

"There's something Jaden wants," Emilie said. "I'm certain of it. Something he believes is here in the Silverwood District."

Darien said to Logan, "Something that he can't obtain unless he has a valid enough reason to come onto your land."

"You were right," Logan said to Darien. "Calanthe might've started this war for her own reasons, but now that she is gone, Jaden has picked up where she left off, using it for his own purpose." He shook his head, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. "Whatever that may be."

"And doesn't need to explain that purpose to anyone else at the Blood Rose," Emilie chimed in. "The seat is his, and as such, everyone listens to him, especially now that my mother is gone." Her lip curled back over her teeth, elongated canines glinting in the light streaming in through the skylight.

Darien's phone started buzzing. He hurried to get it out of his jacket and answered with a muffled, "Hey."

Travis didn't bother saying hello. Instead, he got straight to the point, his words tangled up with a groan. "I'm starting to feel like a tattle-tale."

"Are you going to actually tell me this time, or do I need to guess?"

A beat of silence. And then, "Loren was here." Travis's reply pushed Darien into action. He stalked out of Logan's house without a backward glance, screen door banging shut behind him, fingers squeezing the phone tight. "At Hell's Gate."

Darien's stomach dipped as he hurried across the porch and down the steps, wood sinking underfoot.

Travis continued, "I passed her on my way into the house."

"What was she doing there?" Darien got in the car, started it, and reversed out of Logan's driveway, gravel flying. "Did you talk to her?"

"I didn't really get a chance to. She had a cab waiting at the gate."

"Did she take anything with her?" Darien's lungs felt tight. "Can you check, please?" If Loren was packing up the last of her things... Darien couldn't take it.

"It doesn't look like it, but...hold on." It sounded like Travis was ascending the stairs. "She left her planner here. Must've fallen out of

her bag or something.”

Darien sped through the Silverwood District, ripping through the streets so quickly he was nearing the border in no time. He could see the white paint marking the road up ahead, the werewolf symbol—a howling wolf with a crescent moon behind it—that signaled where Logan’s territory ended. Various streets throughout Werewolf and Vampire Territory were marked with symbols to show which packs or houses were in charge of the land. Same with the venefica districts. “Don’t judge me for asking this, but can you go to today’s date?” Darien asked.

The rustling of pages filled the speaker. “She has her classes written down. Herbology was finished at one p.m., looks like she had a half-day.... Does AA do half-days?”

“Trav,” Darien complained. “Focus. Please.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “At the bottom, it says *Tattoo at Angelthene General — 2:30 p.m.*”

“Thanks, Trav. I’ll take it from here.” He hung up before Travis could talk some sense into him.

Maybe he was a psycho boyfriend for doing this, but he didn’t care. He drove straight to the hospital, blowing through yellow lights and a few red ones, horns chasing him everywhere he went. He’d promised Loren that he would hold her hand every time she got her tattoo touched up, and he wasn’t one to break promises, not when he made them to her.

Not only that, but he was starting to worry about her—in different ways than he had all week.

Was it possible that she was in trouble? That she was connected in some way to all this fuckery going on around him? Now that Emilie had shown up, revealing that even the vampires were tangled up in some shady shit, he wasn’t crossing anything or anyone off his list.

He hoped he was wrong, and that her excuse not to see him—her excuse about being afraid of Gaven—was the only thing keeping her from him.

But if there was another reason, if he had been too short-sighted to see the danger she was in... He would hate himself. He would hate himself for being so blind and insecure.

When he got to the hospital, he would find out. And no matter the answer, he would listen to her. He couldn’t handle this yoyoing of their relationship anymore. Even though he was new to the dating scene, it was common knowledge that communication could make or break a relationship.

And fuck, he would make her talk to him, even if he didn’t end up liking what she said. At least then, if he found out what was truly wrong, he would have the opportunity to fix it.

He would not waste that opportunity.

Darien hurried through Angelthene General Hospital, weaving around nurses and healers and patients and guests, ignoring the curious and fearful eyes tracking his every step.

He'd found out from one of the receptionists which room Loren was having her procedure in, and as soon as the number had left the woman's mouth, he'd hurried straight to the elevator and ridden it to the third floor, nearly prying the doors open as soon as it had lurched to a stop.

As he walked, boots pounding the floors, he shook back the sleeve of his jacket and checked his watch.

It was only two thirty-one. Maybe he didn't need to sprint there and put every employee on high alert in the process.

"Dare," called a bass voice from one of the rooms he breezed by.

Darien backed up and glanced in the open doorway.

Malakai was sitting in a chair beside an examination table, fingers laced behind his head. Perched on that examination table was Jewels. Under the fluorescents, she somehow managed to look paler than she already was, not a hint of pink in her cheeks. There were beads of sweat on her forehead, causing strands of purplish hair to stick to her skin.

Darien took one step into the room, still half-turned toward the hallway. "You okay, Jewely?"

She was swinging her legs from side to side, platform sneakers thumping against the table. "As okay as I can be." The tight smile she offered him was more like a grimace. There was a bandage in the crease of her elbow, a cotton ball taped under it.

More tests. They never ended when the Tricking was leeching your life away.

"Where you going?" Malakai asked, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees.

"I'm meeting Loren."

Malakai frowned. "I passed her in the hallway."

"Did she look okay?" He hoped he wasn't too late.

"I guess so. I don't think she saw me." Malakai studied him, the emotions on his face impossible to read. "Some guy was with her."

Darien didn't get punched very often, but he was well aware of what it felt like—and Malakai's statement was like a fist to the gut. Suddenly, he couldn't draw air, but he managed to use what was left in his lungs to bite out one word that was as empty as his head suddenly felt.

*"What?"*

—

Loren's heart thrummed, each separate beat blending into one, making her feel dizzy and sick. She knew her feelings had less to do with the tattoo procedure and more to do with the person lounging on a stool at her side, in the spot where Darien should've been.

Thank the Star it wasn't Doctor Atlas this time. Instead, it was a young nurse doing an extra careful job of refreshing her ink, prolonging the pain for accuracy. Loren would take it this time, would grin and bear it. The last thing her relationship needed was for Darien to find out she was getting this procedure done without him, another man sitting in his spot beside the examination table, only here right now because they would be meeting the emperor as soon as they were done.

Klay was different than Darien. He didn't once offer her any words of comfort or even a pat on the shoulder, not that she wanted him to give her any of that. If he'd tried, she would've smacked him in the face. He wasn't here for her, he was here for his dad, and it showed in the way he swiveled his stool back and forth, eyes drifting to the ceiling. Loren kept half-expecting him to say, "Are we done yet?" like a ten-year-old whining to his parents.

"You know you didn't have to come with," she said, wincing as the iridescent ink bonded to her bloodstream. It spread beneath her skin like acid, her free hand crumpling the crepe paper on the table. The sound brought back an onslaught of memories of how she'd felt the last time she'd had this done, when Darien had stepped forward and taken her hand into both of his. Back when she'd first felt that electric current coursing between them, a wonderful feeling that was both wildly addicting and wholly satisfying, like finding something she'd spent her whole life looking for without knowing what it was.

"Are you kidding?" Klay tipped back the stool, hands behind his head, teetering precariously on one wheel as he studied the textured ceiling. "I'm having a great time. This is loads of fun. No place I'd rather be." Mister Stares A Lot had a new nickname, and it was Mister Sarcasm. Loren pictured that stool crashing to the ground, his stupid ass falling with it. Maybe he'd break it on the way down, along with his stupid face.

Loren drew a hiss in through her teeth as the nurse colored in the last of the tattoo, the ink lighting up her forearm with neon pastels.

In her peripheral vision, Loren saw Klay look toward the door.

And then he was lunging forward and grabbing her hand, his fingers lacing with hers.

Her head whipped in Klay's direction. "What are you doing?"

Before he had a chance to speak, and before she could pull her fingers free of his too-tight grasp, she caught sight of who was standing in the doorway, looking very much like a shadow of death.

"Am I interrupting something?" Darien's deep voice floated through the room, and although it was calm, Loren knew him well enough to sense an undercurrent of ire.

Crap. This was not supposed to happen.

Loren tried to yank her hand free of Klay's squeezing fingers, one of her knuckles cracking with the attempt. "Let go, you imbecile!" When he finally released her, she held that hand out for Darien instead.

She tried to see what Klay was seeing in that moment, and smug pride spread through her, filling her heart up like a balloon.

The midnight-black hair, the face that was as handsome as it was frightening in its intensity, the black leather jacket with zippers and the odd patch of ancient symbols, the black cargo pants and boots that had walked places where most people wouldn't dare, the tattoos on his scarred hands and knuckles—and, of course, the small one below his ear that let people know precisely how dangerous he was.

The Darkslayer headed for Klay, footsteps pounding. He propped a boot on the stool base and pushed Klay several feet away from the examination table, wheels squealing.

"What's your name?" Darien demanded, his tone far from polite as he positioned himself between Loren and Klay, his broad back blocking her view.

Klay answered immediately, his tone stiff but not rude. A wise decision. "Klay."

Loren reached for Darien, her fingers closing around the worn leather of his sleeve, but he didn't turn.

"Do you know who I am?" he said to Klay.

"Yup."

"Tell me in case you've got it wrong."

There was a beat of silence before Klay spoke. "Darien Cassel."

"So you're not as stupid as you look."

Klay smirked. "I'm sorry, did I miss something? You're acting like I've offended you, and I've never even met you before."

An awkward and tense silence spread through the room. The nurse's hand faltered and then quickened, as if she couldn't wait to get

out of here. She kept her head down, her focus on the ink.

Loren's breathing turned shallow as she stared up at Darien, wishing she could see his face, wishing she could see Klay, but he was hidden behind the towering Darkslayer, whose slicked-back hair gleamed in the buzzing fluorescents like liquid night.

Finally, Darien spoke. "Relax, man, I'm just razzing you." It was still there: the undercurrent of anger. Only this time, it was building, and Loren's heartrate skyrocketed from the sound of it. "Why don't we step outside for a second and let the lady finish her job?"

Loren tightened her hold on his soft sleeve. "Darien," she pleaded.

He turned around. Their eyes locked, and he lifted a hand to her face, gently brushing a strand of wavy hair off her forehead. "It's okay."

Was it, though? She didn't think so. And the look on his face—the deadly one that hinted at black eyes approaching on the horizon—suggested she was right.

She watched helplessly as the love of her life and the newest pain in her ass left the room without her to do gods-knew-what while unsupervised in the hallway. Darien even shut the door behind him, and that was when she realized she had a lot to worry about and a very small chance of stopping it.

—

Darien had already imagined a million ways to kill Klay for grabbing his woman's hand by the time he stepped out into the hallway, pulling the door to the examination room shut behind him.

They faced each other in the quiet, neither of them saying a word. The only sounds in the area were the distant ticking of a clock and the low drone of landlines ringing with incoming calls.

Darien could feel the fear on Klay's aura, but while his silence was due to fear, Darien's was due to contemplation. He was busy deciding whether he would carve out Klay's heart, strangle him with an IV line, or cut off his head with a surgical saw.

He'd just settled on the surgical saw when Klay opened his idiotic mouth. "I guess you want an apology or someth—"

Darien grabbed him by the front of his shirt collar and slammed him up against the wall. Klay grunted, sounding like he was choking on his own spit, as Darien snarled in his face, "She's *mine*. Keep your hands off her or I'll cut them off."

Klay was doing his best to hold his hands up in surrender while being pinned to the wall like a hunting trophy. "Ooookay." He huffed a nervous laugh. "I think we've had a bit of a misunderstanding."

"The only person misunderstanding is *you*, you handsy prick. That's



my girl, and you're not allowed to touch her. Got it?"

His mouth formed a daring smirk. "If she's your girl, then why'd she ask me to come to her appointment instead of you?"

Darien hated that he had no answer to that. And the longer he stared at Klay in silence, gripping his collar tight, the more amused the prick looked. His aura turned smug, the racing in his chest taking on a daring feel instead of a fearful one.

A cocky smile spread across Handsy's face. "Don't have an answer, do you?"

"She didn't want you to hold her hand," Darien said icily.

"Only because she knew you were watching."

Darien gripped him tighter, slamming him against the wall. "Mind your tongue or I'll rip it out and feed it to you."

Klay's hands inched upward. Fresh terror shone in his eyes, the smug tint to his aura going right out the window.

Darien pulled him down from the wall roughly, realizing he'd pinned him up so high that his feet had been dangling off the ground, and gave him a hard shove down the hallway.

Before he could face-plant on the vinyl floor, Klay pushed himself up with the heels of his hands. With a glare in Darien's direction, he regained his equilibrium with his back against the wall, taking a minute to fix his rumpled collar. "You Darkslayers are a temperamental bunch."

"Hands off or you're going to regret it." He could hear Loren thanking the nurse on the other side of the door, her sweet voice getting closer. "Now act happy or I'll punch your fucking teeth out."

The door opened, and Loren stepped out. She was wearing sneakers, faded jeans, and...and one of his zip-up hoodies, he realized. Following closely behind her, clipboard in hand, was the nurse, who cast a worried glance at their group.

"Everything okay?" Loren asked, her eyes only for Darien, thank fuck. The nurse bustled away, looking grateful to be relieved of her responsibilities as she headed down to the reception desk.

"Everything's peachy, baby," Darien said. "We were just getting to understand each other a bit better. Isn't that right, Klay?"

"Yeah," Klay said tightly, dusting off his shirt. "We understand each other real well now."

Loren looked between them. "Okay, then," she sighed. "Umm, shall we go?" Her question was for Klay, who nodded and began to drift down the hallway, a stupid smile on his face.

And for the second time that afternoon, Darien felt like someone had punched him.

"Go?" Darien repeated. "Go where?"

"We have a project we need to finish at the academy," Loren said

weakly. "That's why he brought me here, why I didn't..." Why she hadn't asked him to take her here instead.

"A project." Darien's voice was flat. He felt a Surge knocking, but he mentally stomped it down. It was a million degrees in here and steam was blowing out his ears and nose. He felt like he was going to explode like that hellseher in the warehouse.

"It's just a school thing, Darien." Her voice was gentle. Pleading.

Klay was down the hallway now. Looking over his shoulder at their exchange. Piece of fucking shit.

Darien looked back at Loren. "Baby, he was holding your hand."

"I didn't want him to do that."

"Great, so can I beat the shit out of him, then?"

"It was a joke."

"Well, it isn't fucking funny."

"He won't do it again. I promise."

"He'd better not, or I'll kill him. Anyone who touches you against your permission, I don't care if it's your hand or your ass, they're getting their heart ripped out and shoved down their throat."

Loren paled. At the sound of her heart skipping in her chest, Darien found himself evaluating his own words.

But he'd meant every word. Every single one.

"I'll tell you if he tries to do it again," Loren whispered. "Okay? Is that what you want to hear?"

"I want to hear you say that you want to see me."

Loren was speechless. Darien watched her as her cheeks flushed red, and her eyes got that glassy look to them that told him she was seconds from crying. And even though that was the last thing he wanted, he kept talking, because he had her here right now, right this second, and he didn't want to waste the chance to be heard.

"It's been seven days—yes, I'm counting, forgive me—and I've missed you for every single one. I just want to understand, Loren, that's all I want. I feel like you locked me in a dark room and I've got my hand on the light switch but you're stopping me from turning it on. Just help me to understand—*please*." He pressed his palms together, as if in prayer—because he'd meant what he'd said at her school. He would beg for her. Crawl for her. He would get down on this floor and do anything she asked. "Give me *something*. Even if you said that you didn't want to be with me anymore, it would be easier for me to swallow than this."

Because he would finally have a direct answer.

"That's not what I want."

"But you don't want to see me. You told me that you're afraid of Gaven, and I get it, I can understand your fears, sweetheart. But then I come here and I see you with this guy you never even told me exists."

His eyes locked on Klay, who was still watching. Darien barked, "Mind your own goddamn business or I'll kill you."

Klay held his hands up and turned away.

Darien faced Loren again. "I'm new to this, okay?" He forced himself to breathe. Forced his hands to loosen. "Just like you. We're both still learning, we're growing, and that's to be expected. But what we need is communication. We need to communicate, Loren, and you're not talking to me—"

"I didn't tell you about him because he's just a student." Loren's voice was a defeated croak. "I didn't think it was a big deal. We were assigned to be partners for a botany project, that's it."

"Okay. Okay, fine, I trust you, Loren. I do." He jerked his chin at the hallway at her back. "Go get those good grades."

Loren appeared wounded by the dismissal, but she turned and walked away.

Darien didn't say anything, no matter how badly he wanted to, no matter how badly his palms itched with the need to strike something. He stood there and watched as his woman followed another man, past the many rooms filled with Tricking patients and mortals who were squaring off with death at the end of their short lives.

His blood was scalding. His heart pounded with rage. Black pushed at the whites of his eyes, but he fought it—he fought it hard.

He needed to get away from here—

Loren was halfway down the hallway when she froze and turned back around. For a minute, she stood there, not looking at him, hands in fists that were swallowed up by the sleeves of his hoodie, the clothing item far too big for her tiny body.

And then she hurried back to him, eyes on her feet.

Darien waited, pushing the mess of emotions and thoughts into the farthest corners of his heart and mind, forcing himself to keep it together for her, to not make a scene or make her feel bad—or, worse, give her a reason to want to be around Klay instead of him.

"Hey," she began, tucking her hair behind an ear. "Umm." It took her a moment to make eye contact with him, and when she finally did, there was a hint of fear in her eyes. Darien worried that it was there because of him. Was she afraid of him? It was enough to make the Surge retreat, if only briefly, leaving him able to think clearer.

And then Darien remembered their suite. He'd destroyed their bedroom, and she had been at Hell's Gate just now... And now *this* had happened, his fucking violent tendencies showing through the threats he'd just uttered.

Shit.

When Loren spoke, her voice was quiet. "I don't think this project is going to take us very long. I put together some bouquets at the

apothecary last weekend. I was thinking we could bring one and go to City Cemetery together?”

Darien glanced over her head to see Klay still waiting at the end of the hallway. Arms crossed, watching. Like a fucking idiot preying on a woman that wasn't his.

Darien looked back at Loren. “Tonight?”

“Yeah. Eight o'clock? We'll go together.”

To his mother's grave. A place he hadn't been since... Well, ever. He'd never gone. Not once.

There was a lump in his throat. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Sounds good, sweetheart.”

She stepped closer, tipping her head back. He knew what she wanted, but for a reason he couldn't totally explain to himself, he kissed her on the forehead instead of the mouth.

“I'll see you tonight,” he offered. Even he could hear how cold his voice sounded. He hated himself for it, but he couldn't stop it in time.

“Yeah, okay.” Her voice was breathy and weak and... Shit. Were those tears? For fuck's sake, he'd made her cry. “See you.”

Head bowed, she turned and walked away before he could say anything else. But even if she'd stayed, he wasn't sure he would've spoken up. He was at a loss as to what to do, what to think, how to feel. When he'd found Loren in that alley on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star, he'd discovered a purpose, a home that was a person instead of a place. She was his heart, his place of refuge and security, the only woman he'd ever wanted, the only woman he'd ever been in love with.

She was his forever and always, and not long ago he'd believed he was hers. But while she was absolutely perfect in every way, he...he wasn't. And seeing her with someone else, even if it *was* for something as innocent as a school project, set fire to a new emotion he'd hoped not to feel again for a really long time.

It was fear, realer than his heart beating in his chest. Fear that she was slipping through the cracks of his broken life, and fear that he loved her too much to stop her from going.

—

Loren could scarcely breathe, her inability to draw air the result of a confusing mixture of anger and sorrow, the emotions so debilitating she could barely function. Barely *think*.

As soon as she was out the front doors of the hospital and around the corner of the building, she lost it.

She shoved Klay in the chest so hard, he actually stumbled.

*"You're an asshole, Klay,"* she hissed. She advanced on him, hands curling into fists at her sides, the sleeves of Darien's hoodie swallowing her fingers up. "You are never going to do that again, do you understand me?" She shoved him again, but this time he was prepared, and he didn't budge, his chest like solid rock.

The ass was smirking. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You are never going to touch me again, and you are never going to bait Darien again. This wasn't part of our agreement."

"The agreement involves me making sure you stay away from your boyfriend. So, technically, I didn't overstep."

Loren glowered up at him, her vision blurring with rage and sadness and the slanted rays of the sun that were stabbing into her eyes. "I can't wait to be done with this shit."

A taxi slowed by the curb. The driver unlocked the doors.

"I would enjoy this while you can," Klay said as he made for the passenger's-side door, forcing Loren to take the back. "Because once my dad has what he wants from you, you're all dead."

Loren froze mid-reach of the door handle. "What did you say?"

Klay shrugged. "I mean, I wouldn't put it past him." He swung open the door before Loren could argue any further.

Her blood boiled as she got in the taxi.

Of course the emperor would have some sick plan for when this was over. Either she would die, or they all would.

And she would much prefer the first option.

Darien had been seeing red all afternoon. He'd driven the streets without purpose or direction, only stopping once to buy smokes and charge his car at one of the cristala stations in Black Alder.

It had taken everything in his power not to snap that asshole's neck in the examination room, laughing as he did it. The only reason he'd resisted was because of Loren. But he was so mad, he knew it wouldn't be long before he exploded. It was a good thing he was currently in one of the seediest districts in Angelthene; if he lost it on someone, there was an extremely high chance his victim would be a piece of shit who deserved getting his ass handed to him.

Time and place were everything when he was feeling...like *this*. And he would never hurt Loren by acting on unchecked emotions, especially not when she had clearly brought that asshole—Klay—to her appointment with her.

The more he thought about it, the more he wished he hadn't gone to the hospital. He was probably jumping to stupid, far-fetched conclusions and was well on his way to winding up behind bars because of it.

Had any other girl done this to him, he would've said screw it, I don't need you.

But Loren? Fuck, he needed her, and he couldn't even pretend that he didn't. He'd never been more certain of anything in his life than he was her. She was the one thing he'd finally got right.

He was ripping the car down a side road in the Black Alder District when someone called him.

Grabbing his phone out of the cup holder, he checked the screen to see an unknown number flashing across it.

He swiped right and lifted the phone to his ear. "Who's this?"

"It's Christa."

Darien eased off the accelerator as the car zipped around a sharp corner, the edge of the seatbelt digging into his chest. "Whose phone are you calling me from?"

"Mine." She spoke quietly. Darien detected a note of fear in her voice. "It's one of my burners."

"Do you have something worth my time?" He pushed the car faster, blowing past a semi. The driver blared his horn.

"That's why I'm calling. Are you available to meet tonight?"

“Where and when?”

“The old subway entrance in the Financial District.”

“North or South?”

“South. Seven o’clock?” Seven o’clock didn’t give him much time before he was supposed to see Loren, but he would make it work.

“I’ll be there,” he said.

“Come alone.” She hung up.

—

Loren was far too aware of how much time was passing as she walked through the tunnels below the city.

About a dozen of the emperor’s men surrounded her, Klay at her right. She hoped she would be in and out of Spirit quickly enough to meet Darien, to not cause a delay in showing him what was going on by not meeting up with him on time.

She did her best to keep her breathing steady as she walked through the dimly lit space, past men armed to the teeth. There had to be at least a hundred of them down here. The overspray from the waterfalls misted her face and dampened her clothes.

When she caught sight of the person waiting near the entrance into Spirit Terra, she froze. One of the men guarding her nudged her in the back with his gun. But her feet wouldn’t move, and she couldn’t tear her startled gaze from the man standing near the emperor.

The golden hair struck through with silver. The ocean-blue eyes, the rich shade so similar to her own. The way he constantly had trouble looking at her, as if he spent every day of his life in shame.

“What is this?” Loren managed to say, pinning the emperor in place with a look that could cut. “Why have you brought him here?”

The emperor stepped forward. “Motivation,” he said simply. “Our options were to either bring your father here, or to bring Darien. And something tells me this is the decision you would prefer.”

Loren bared her teeth. Her next words were shouts that echoed. “You promised to not involve anyone I care about!”

“You’re right,” Quinton began. “But you’re not accomplishing our mission quickly enough, Loren. Your father is here to serve as a reminder of what will happen if you try to step out of line.”

Erasmus spoke up. “I’m also h-here to help you, Loren. I know you are trying your best to learn how to use your magic—”

Loren interrupted, the words she directed at the emperor volleying off the walls. “He doesn’t need to be here to help me, I’ve learned enough on my own—”

“Then perhaps you would be willing to show us,” Quinton said. He gestured to the rippling wall at his back. Was it just her, or was the

tear in the Veil getting wider? It was beginning to look less like a doorway and more like a giant, gaping mouth that was tearing at the edges. The wall around it was cracking, and so was the high ceiling, bits of stone scattered across the floor. Quinton finished, "Get ready, and we will bring you to your next task."

Loren's eyes flicked to the table. Among the weapons and boxes, there were briefcases. One of those briefcases was wide open, revealing the syringes inside, all of them forming neat rows.

She walked over to the table, dropped her purse and tote bag on the floor, and began to unzip her hoodie.

But she stopped. Glanced around at the guards, the emperor, Klay, her father. Johnathon Kyle wasn't here today.

"I'm not wearing anything under this," she lied, gesturing to her hoodie. "Please turn around so I can change."

Erasmus did so without delay. A few of the men did as well, though their smirks didn't escape her notice.

Quinton didn't turn, and neither did his son, their expressions revealing nothing. A few of the guards who were still watching looked far too amused, showing no sign of looking away from her.

She crossed her arms. "The longer we stand here, the more you delay your goal," she said to Quinton. "Is a little privacy too much to ask? Or are you going to strip me of that too?"

Silence swept through the tunnels, broken up by the rumble of distant thunder in Spirit Terra and the splashing of the waterfalls.

Finally, everyone turned. Even the emperor, though Loren could tell the bastard wasn't giving her the full amount of privacy she'd asked for, which meant she would have to do this very, very carefully.

Because she had lied. She had a shirt on under the hoodie, and she couldn't risk the emperor spotting it and wrecking her plan.

Quickly, she crouched before her bag, dug out her rain jacket, and turned to Klay.

"Klay," she called.

He turned his upper half slightly, eyeing her over his shoulder.

"Will you hold this up for me?" she asked, gesturing to the rain jacket. "Since a few of your father's men seem to have curious eyes." She shot a glare at one of them, causing him to turn back around.

Klay stepped up, took the jacket from her, and did as she'd requested, turning his head the other way.

Quickly, she took off the hoodie, pulling it over her head instead of unzipping it. As she pulled it off, she removed her shirt too...

And then she swept her right hand behind her and snagged two of the syringes from the briefcases, being careful not to let the glass clink.

Her heart threatened to race as she used Darien's hoodie to conceal



the syringes and stuffed them in her bag. She still had one spare syringe, which gave her three in total. It never hurt to have an extra.

When she was finished, she put the t-shirt back on. She zipped her bag shut and shoved it under the table, hoping no one would snoop through her things while she was in Spirit Terra. Lastly, she ripped the jacket out of Klay's hold and draped it across her bag.

Everyone in the area turned to look at her as she stood.

"Let's go," she said. Pushing her hair to one side, she walked forward, allowing one of the emperor's men to insert a Life Clock into her neck, needle pinching. She twisted the ring on her finger, bodysuit covering her from her head to her toes.

Particles and balls of light floated about as she stepped through the Veil, wincing at the feeling of her soul being pulled about, like a strip of too-thin fabric put through a wringer.

With a deep breath that did not shake, she prepared to do whatever was necessary to make it back to Darien on time.

—

Seven o'clock had finally arrived.

The city was shrouded in a thick blanket of fog. The southern end of the Financial District was always cleared out by this hour, the hundreds of businesses dotting the blocks having adapted their closing schedules to fit the hunting patterns of the demons running amuck in the abandoned subway system. Construction of a sky train was nearly completed, the elevated guideway a far safer option for a city whose pest problem had prompted them to shut down one of the most reliable forms of transit.

Dressed in a hoodie, a sports hat, and blue jeans, Darien walked through the wall of fog, using his Sight to navigate, the shades that made up his soul hidden with Nacht Essentia. The demons were already out, their smoky auras burning like dark stars in the parkades, alleys, and shopping square far ahead. Through the pavement beneath his feet, he saw hundreds of them swarming the tunnels. They crowded the old subway tracks, fighting over bones and feasting on rats.

The subway entrance up ahead was gated and locked. A lone figure stood beside it, the hood of her long coat hiding her face. A small wildcat Familiar sat at her side, long tail twitching.

As soon as Christa recognized him, she came closer, her Familiar following on light paws. They both froze when they spotted the three silhouettes—three Reapers—walking at Darien's back.

Christa backed up, her body angled to run in the opposite direction. Darien could hear her heart sprinting from here. "I asked

you to come alone.” Her smoky voice carried through the chalky fog.

Darien stopped three paces away, Malakai, Valen, and Sylvan doing the same. They, too, were dressed casually, their auras concealed with the same plant that had given him the fuck-around for months.

“And I seem to have misplaced my trust for you,” Darien replied coolly. Seeing the fear written on her doll-like face, Darien added, “Relax, Christa. I’m the same person I’ve always been. None of us will harm you, I swear it.”

A minute later, her body visibly relaxed. Reangling to face their group, she drew a deep breath and found her words. “After Channary accepted your offer, she was approached by Lionel,” she began. “They had plans to ally to try to overthrow you, but after finding out you’d managed to obtain the approval of nearly every house, she determined the risk wasn’t worth the reward. Lionel, however, wasn’t willing to let it go so easily. He knew he had to make Channary an offer that was better than yours, and that...that was exactly what he did.” The look on her face was hard to read, but there was apprehension there.

Darien said, “What did he offer her?”

“As Randal’s former Right Hand, Lionel knew a lot of the moves Randal made. Can you think of the one thing that would be of more value to both of them than the Darkslaying throne?” She allowed for a pause, her gaze flicking to Malakai for one split second. Darien knew exactly what she was about to say, but the words were out of her mouth before he could stop her. “The Arcanum Well.”

Tension prickled among their group. Darien felt his heart briefly stop, the feeling soon doubled by Valen and Sylvan murmuring to each other, their words too quiet to pick out.

He shouldn’t have brought the Reapers here, should’ve come alone

---

Malakai said, “I’ve heard rumors about this.” His tone was electric with hope. “I also heard a girl is the key to using it.”

Christa looked at Darien, and he looked back at her. Darien held her stare and shook his head—just barely, the motion too subtle for anyone other than Christa to notice. Darien willed her to read the one word he was spelling out in his gaze.

*Please.*

With another deep breath, Christa said to Malakai, “These are just rumors. None of them have been proven true.”

Darien hurried to speak before the Reapers could ask any questions of their own. “What else do you know?”

“That Lionel and Channary are biding their time concerning several things. Number one: they know there are people looking for the Well, and they figure if they stand by and wait for the right time, they can

swoop in and take it as soon as someone else—”

“Has done all the work for them,” Darien concluded.

“Yes,” Christa confirmed with a stiff nod. “Number two: the Well gives a person unlimited access to their magic. With it, they would be stronger than everyone. Even you.” Her eyes were all for Darien, and he could see her worry for him simmering within. “Number three: Channary knows who Gaven is. I believe she plans to notify him of your attempts to throw him behind bars, so that it will create a problem for you as soon as she needs it. Her knowledge is a weapon she is waiting to fire.” Not to mention that killing another circle was grounds enough to start a war among all of Angelthene’s Darkslayers, so if she used Gaven to take down Darien and his Devils instead...

For god’s sake. This was bad.

Darien managed to say, “Do you know where the Well is? If we can find it before them—”

“That, I don’t know. But I would be willing to bet Lionel does, and he’s been watching whoever is responsible for the search for the Well.”

“So if we watch Lionel,” Malakai cut in, throwing Valen and Sylvan a loaded look, “we might be able to find out.”

Christa shrugged. “Maybe. But I would tread carefully. One wrong move, and this whole thing could go up in flames.”

Darien’s mind whirled with thoughts of Loren, of Klay... If this had anything to do with that asshole, if she was in trouble and he’d let her walk away from him in the hospital like that...

“Thanks, Christa,” Darien bit out. “I’ll take it from here.”

He walked away, Reapers following.

Christa’s soft voice chased him through the fog. “Be careful, Darien. Whatever you do.”

They were passing under a plaza arch that was shaped like vampire wings, the sharp tips swallowed up by fog, when Malakai spoke. “I’m finding that Well.”

Darien stopped walking. Turned to face Malakai. When Darien spoke, he was careful to keep the emotion off his face. “We need to take this slow. If they find out—”

“I need that Well, Darien.” Malakai’s firm words echoed through the plaza. “*Jewely* needs that Well.” Shit.

“It can heal the Tricking,” Valen said. “If we had it, we would never have to worry about getting sick.”

Sylvan added, “And think of the power.”

Malakai held up a hand, silencing them. “Nobody’s touching it until Jewels has been healed.”

Darien’s heartbeats were already quick, but they sped up to a sprint at Sylvan’s next words.

“We need the girl,” he said. “I heard the Well can only be used by her—”

“These are nothing but rumors you’re banking on!” Darien barked, voice ripping through the fog. “*None* of them have been proven true.” He pinned Malakai with a cold stare. “We keep moving forward as planned. We take down Gaven, and we worry about the Well after. You made an agreement with me, Malakai, did you not?”

Malakai stepped closer, jaw flexing, hands forming loose fists at his sides. “The minute Gaven is behind bars, that Well is mine. And I would advise you not to stand in my way, Cassel. Not when it’s something like this, and not when it involves my sister. Got it?”

Darien had to force his next word out—and had to force down the red-hot rage prickling beneath his skin, begging him to rip these three men apart where they stood. “Fine.”

Silver canines glinted with a cold smile—a smile that didn’t reach Malakai’s eyes. “Great. Let’s get out of here, then.”

Too many players. There were too many moving players, and Darien had no idea how to control them all. He was keeping secrets from everyone, and if Malakai found out about Loren...

Game over. And the worst part about it was he didn’t know who would win.

—

Loren led the imperator and his men southwest of the entrance into Spirit Terra. A tug in her chest told her where to walk, but she didn’t listen to it.

So far, her plan was working. That pull she felt deep inside her would no doubt lead the imperator to the Arcanum Well, but she had no plans to hand it to him. While it may be trying to tug her northeast, she was the only person who knew that, the only person who could feel the magnetic pull, the only person aware of the heat emanating from the amulet, the telling light hidden beneath her thick bodysuit.

They had walked farther than she had meant to travel, her attempts to lead the imperator and his men away from the Well taking her deeper into Spirit Terra than she had intended. Every step not only took her away from Angelthene, but also away from Darien. She sensed she was running out of time, the pulse of the clock below her ear speeding up.

Out of the corner of her eye, she peeked at Klay. The numbers glowing on the side of his neck declared the winding down of the last two hours. That was one good thing that came of the Life Clocks: when the imperator and his men had a time limit like this, and no

option of bringing more syringes with them into Spirit Terra, they never could stay for long. Soon, she would be heading back to Darien. Soon, she would be putting an end to this.

With a deep breath, she faced ahead. Her feet slowed to dragging at the sight of the structure materializing out of the mist.

A massive tower—a pillar—pierced the sky. It looked just like the two framing the entrance into Spirit Terra, except bigger, larger than the Control Tower. It was made of the same black, glasslike material as the pillars under Angelthene, only this one was shot through with veins of oozing black instead of rainbow. There was no color here. No color at all.

Beyond that pillar was another Veil. An endless black wall that looked like undulating ink. The temperature here was so cold, the ground was covered in frost, the plants glazed with ice that made them look like glass.

One of the men faced the emperor. “The Void, sir.”

Loren wasn’t sure why, but the statement made her blood run cold, her heart crackling, as if the same ice that coated the plants was spreading into her body. Her hand drifted toward the sensation in her chest—toward the amulet whose heat she could no longer feel.

“What’s the Void?” she asked, that strange metallic tone of her voice carrying far. The desolate land whispered her words back to her with a series of echoes.

Quinton stepped up to the pillar. Tilted his head back, peering all the way up to the top. The peak of the pillar was lost in a brewing storm. Teal light glowed within that storm, the color outlining the short silver hairs on the emperor’s head.

“What is the Void?” she said again.

There was movement beyond the Divide. A rippling of shadow. Something was pacing on the other side of that wall.

Loren’s boot scraped as she stepped closer, squinting her eyes to see, a frozen tree branch snapping under her foot. The closer she got to the pillar, the more hollowed out she felt. A wind carried her hair back, and her teeth buzzed in her mouth, eyes watering. If she felt this terrible when she was still several feet away from it, she feared getting closer.

The men surrounding her readied their guns, pointing them at the misty wall, eyes peering through crosshairs.

One of those men glanced at Quinton, tossing his head in the direction of the Divide. “Shucca,” he said, voice hushed.

Loren stepped back. “What’s a Shucca?”

The man smiled at her. “You’ll do best to shut your eyes if you hear their howls, girl.”

Erasmus was watching her, eyes wide with fear. “Are you c-certain

this is where we should go, Loren?"

Loren shook her head. "I don't know, I— Can someone please tell me what the Void is? What are we looking at?"

"The V-void—," Erasmus began.

Quinton interrupted. "The Void is just another of the many sections in Spirit Terra." He faced her. "If this is where you say we will find the Well, then we need to lower this wall."

"*Are you crazy?*" she hissed. "If I lower this Veil, we are all dead!" It didn't matter if no one would tell her what a Shucca was. She could see them well enough through the rippling Divide, their silhouettes testing the perimeter. There had to be at least a dozen of them. They moved like wolves, but that was all she could see of them.

"You have nothing to fear, Calla," Quinton said, gesturing for his men to form a line of defense. They did so without delay, ribbons of color threading through the transparent cartridges in their guns. "We have the appropriate weapons to kill these creatures." As if that was supposed to make her feel any better.

"I don't care," she snapped. "Do you not see how many of them are in there? There's no way you could take them all!"

"Use the Darkslayer," Klay said. He came closer, his advancement causing Loren to back up, the magic coming off the pillar sending a chill up her spine. "Remember what I told you? She's triggered whenever Darien Cassel is involved."

Loren bristled. "Don't."

But it was too late.

With one hard blink that darkened his eyes, the emperor's magic lashed into her mind.

Those same images were back. Those awful images of her family being tortured and killed. The one the emperor showed her the most was the one where Darien was strung up on the wall near the entrance to Spirit Terra, his blood pooling on the ground—

White heat and rainbow light erupted out of her with a scream. She thrust her hand out, aiming to impale the emperor with the raw power.

But he grabbed onto her wrist as her aura spread through her fingertips—

And slapped her palm onto the pillar.

Waves of color flowed from her body. It coursed into the pillar like water breaking through a dam, her blood vibrating with the blow of all that energy vacating her system, making her feel hollow, a mere husk of a woman. The pillar greedily sucked back her magic, the veins in the ground drinking it up, glowing brightly, every single branch lighting up with the various shades of her soul.

She felt her eyes turn solid white. Felt moisture dripping down her

cheeks, but she swore she wasn't crying.

It was color. Color dripping down her cheeks like paint.

For one split second, she could see everything, could see through every veil in all of Spirit Terra.

She saw a tree, glowing teal, its great roots arching like a dome above a luminescent pond. Fireflies, their bodies and wings the same shade of blue as the water and tree, fluttered about, alighting on gnarled branches and lily pads floating on the surface of the water.

It was life. Immortality. The restorative body of water everyone sought, the answers to all their questions, right within reach.

The Veil fell down. The tree disappeared from her mind. The hounds—the Shucca—charged through.

Exactly as she'd feared, there were too many of them.

Barks and growls rent the air. Bullets were fired, beams of white sinking deep into tattered flesh that hung off ribcages. Black hearts beat within those ribcages, secreting an oily black substance that dripped to the ground with every pulsation.

More bullets were fired, but it wasn't enough.

The biggest Shucca in the pack took down one of the men, throwing him to the ground, teeth ripping into his jugular.

Another of the men had his back and chest torn open. He screamed as the dog ripped a chunk of flesh away, baring his lung to the icy air.

Quinton used his magic to pulverize the Shucca's heart, literally exploding it in the canine's chest. Black moisture showered the air.

But there were still too many. Even with the emperor moving to incapacitate another, eyes as black as Shucca hearts, there were too many.

A dark shape hurtled toward Loren.

Not her—toward her *dad*. Erasmus stumbled away, face stricken with terror.

She acted—fast.

Her power erupted out of her like rainbow lightning, slicing through the creature—through *every* creature. It carved them up until they were nothing but steaming chunks, their hearts deflating like popped balloons, blood fizzling into the frosted ground.

Loren gaped, looking between her hand—a blossom of power glowing in the centre—and the destruction spread around her.

She had done that. *She* had done that.

There was no time to lose. If she could do that to these creatures, then she could do it to the emperor and his men.

Quickly, she moved, hand lashing out before her, her whole body glowing white and rainbow. That bud of magic that resembled a flower expanded in her flattened palm—

Her bodysuit suddenly electrified like a taser, and her magic shut

off, as if a switch was hit.

She fell to the ground, fingers grasping at the neck of her bodysuit. Bolts of electricity crackled there, like a collar of lightning, the heat searing her skin.

Erasmus rushed over, falling to his knees beside her. “L-Loren. Loren—”

But she couldn’t answer him. Couldn’t focus on anything but the agony crippling her body, rendering her useless and barely able to breathe.

It felt like an eternity before the pain finally stopped.

Dirt crunched underfoot as someone approached.

Erasmus looked up, throat bobbing, his closed mouth twitching with the angry words he held back.

Loren coughed up blood, vision wheeling as she took in the man—Quinton—leaning over her, a cruel smile marring his face.

“You didn’t think I wouldn’t take precautions, did you?” he hissed. One hand was on his knee, the other holding up a switch—a trigger for her bodysuit. A built-in taser. “Stupid girl.” He straightened and turned to face the remainder of his men, a couple of them injured. “Take her back. Let her recuperate.” Of the man writhing on the ground in agony, lung exposed to the air, he said, “Kill him.”

“No!” the man blubbered. “No, no, please—”

His cries were silenced by a bullet to the heart, a spear of white briefly lighting up the area as it was ejected from the gun.

Choking back the blood still crowding her throat, Loren turned her head in the dirt to see the Veil.

It was still standing. Her power had not fully taken it down.

It was luck, that’s what it was. The Shucca had made it through, the Veil weakened during that brief moment when her power had flowed through the pillar.

She did not want to know what else roamed the area the imperator called *the Void*.



Darien and the three Reapers were nearing the block where they'd left their vehicles when the clap of footfall cut through the fog.

He turned toward the sound, the others doing the same, hands inching toward guns.

"Darien!" Christa called, her silhouette appearing in the gloom, Familiar bounding at her side. "Darien, wait! Please!"

No one relaxed their hands or their stances as Christa slowed before them, panting. The eyes of all three Reapers turned black. They scanned the area, looking for anyone who might be watching.

"My car won't start," Christa said, every word punctuated by gasps.

"How convenient," Malakai scoffed.

Darien studied her. "Your car won't start in a city powered by the anima mundi?"

"I don't know what's happening, but it won't start, I swear. And all the lights in the parkade are out. The place is crawling with demons."

Valen drawled, "We're supposed to believe that?"

She gave him an icy stare. "If you'd like to pop the hood and tinker around, Valen, feel free. I am telling the truth." She looked back at Darien. "Just give me a ride to the House on the Pier. Please. Or take me to the closest bus stop, I don't care. But I can't stay here."

Christa had barely finished speaking before the hungry baying of demons rippled through the night. Glowing eyes watched them from the fog, the creatures roving in packs. With his Sight, Darien could see the multistory parking garage, every light in the building out.

Darien turned and made for the car that was parked just ahead, the LED lights on the street reflecting in the gunmetal-gray paint. "Get in."

Malakai said, "We'll follow behind you."

Darien stepped off the sidewalk and made his way to the driver's-side door of Travis's sportscar. He'd asked Travis if he could borrow it for tonight, not wanting to run the risk of taking a vehicle that would be easily recognized, should Christa decide to double-cross him. He unlocked it with the remote and got in, the protective spells succumbing to his arrival.

High-heeled boots clicked on pavement as Christa went to her own door, her breath showing in the air. Another abnormally cold night in a city that was growing weirder by the second.

Christa eyed the vehicle. "New car?" She swung open the door, her

Familiar disappearing into her shadow as she got in.

"I borrowed it." Darien shut his door and started the engine. He turned on the heat, a feature seldom used in a city like Angelthene, and cranked the dial to high. Warmth blasted through the vents, chasing away the fog of moisture at the base of the windshield. He pushed back his hood and threw his hat on the back seat.

Christa scanned the interior as she smoothed her long jacket under her thighs and buckled her seatbelt. "Travis, right?"

Darien nodded and pulled out onto the road, Reapers following behind him in Sylvan's car, headlights barely managing to perforate the thick fog.

"Seems like his style," Christa said.

They'd barely made it down the street when a cloud of black caught Darien's eye.

Leaning forward, wrist resting on the steering wheel, he peered up through the windshield to see a flock of winged creatures with whip-like tails soaring through the sky.

"What the hell..." Darien murmured, leaning forward to get a better look, seatbelt tightening.

One of the demons hit the windshield so hard the glass buckled. Darien swerved, and Christa screamed.

The vehicle lurched and slowed, engine protesting under restraint, as at least a dozen of the creatures attacked. Christa was shouting, gripping the handle above her door with one hand, the other holding onto her seat. Four of the windows exploded, and claws ripped right through the roof, metal shards and spears of hard plastic flying.

Behind them, the Reapers were facing the same problem, Sylvan's car swerving, nearly striking a fire hydrant.

"Hold on," Darien said, eyes turning black.

Magic swept out of him in a deadly wave, the force of his attack snapping every demon's neck. All of them were small, barely bigger than fruit bats, so it didn't require much effort, not enough to drain him.

A moment passed before their winged bodies fell to the ground with a series of slaps, a couple bouncing off the hood, bones and wings snapping. In the rear-view mirror, Darien noticed the Reapers had done the same, the tires of Sylvan's car squishing several dead demons as he drove over them, blood squirting out onto the road.

Christa was breathing heavily. "What were those things?"

"I don't know."

Darien picked up speed at the same time as Sylvan, breezing through the Financial District. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to get out of here. He swept a hand across his thighs, pushing the shards of glass to the floor, where they crunched under his boot that shifted on the

accelerator.

Trav was going to be pissed. This wasn't the first time Darien had wrecked one of his cousin's vehicles.

He'd buy him a new one. Take him to whatever lot he wanted and let him pick one out.

No one had a chance to prepare for what came next.

The road literally erupted under their cars, pavement buckling, as if something had struck it from underneath.

Suddenly, they were airborne.

The buildings lining the road cracked and crumbled, as if struck by bombs. Parked and moving vehicles flew, alarm systems wailing. Fire hydrants exploded, water jetting through the air. Every streetlight went dark, bulbs exploding, as all power in the area shut down.

The car spun. And spun and spun.

A shout left Darien's mouth, a warning for Christa to hold on, his voice barely audible over all the noise.

They struck the road, front bumper-first, and rolled.

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

The windshield and back window shattered, shards glittering in midair. The car was crushed to a pulp as it flipped down the street with a piercing *crunch*, bumpers ripping off, tires shredding. Christa was screaming, head snapping back and forth with every spin of the car.

Darien had one split second to act.

With a burst of his magic, he shielded them from the final blow as the car struck ground with a level of force that rattled every bone in his body.

Finally, it stilled.

Darien nearly passed out from the force of the collision. The car was upside down, his seatbelt keeping him from falling flat on his face.

With effort, every muscle screaming, he turned toward Christa, who stirred awake with a pained whimper, a hand pressed against her bloody forehead.

"You okay?" Darien's voice sounded as distant as it had that day in Gaven's warehouse, when he and Malakai had been blown sky-high.

"I think so." Her voice was a gurgle.

Darien unbuckled his seatbelt. He caught himself with a hand in shattered glass, the shards biting into his calloused palm. With a grunt, he righted himself, maneuvering his body as best as he could in the cramped space. "I'll get you out, hold on." He reached across the

car and poised a hand on her buckle. "Hands out, you're going to have to catch yourself."

She braced her shaking hands before her, palms and wrists all cut up.

"Ready?"

Christa nodded.

Darien unbuckled her, her body shooting forward. She landed on her shoulder, glass crunching as she twisted around to face him.

"Your window's too narrow," Darien said, gesturing to the warped metal on her side. "We're going to have to go through mine. Okay?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "Ready when you are."

He grabbed her wrists and tugged her out, moving blindly through his shattered window, glass digging into his knees, the pieces sticking to the fabric of his hoodie that rode up his stomach. He could barely fit out the crushed door, and he almost banged his head, boots thumping on twisted metal, as he shimmied out onto the road.

The Reapers got there as soon as Darien was straightening, pulling Christa up with him.

"Shit," Malakai said. "You alright?"

Darien wiped at the blood streaming from his nose. "I think so."

Sylvan said, "What the hell was that?"

That was when it hit. A sound Darien had felt only once before—on Kalendae, when the waves of magic coming off the Well had ripped into every person in the city who possessed magic, rendering them nearly useless.

Darien clapped his hands over his ears and staggered, nearly falling on his ass. It felt like someone was peeling his flesh off his bones. His skull was cracking open, and his veins were going to burst—

"You okay?" Valen's voice barely reached him.

And then Christa was standing in front of him, reaching for him but not touching. "Darien, what's happening?"

No one else was hearing it, no one was feeling it. No one but him and—

And Malakai, who was crouching down on the road several feet away, his own bloody hands covering his ears, eyes shut tight.

"What's the matter with them?" This question came from Sylvan.

What the hell was happening?

As soon as the sound ebbed, and Darien could breathe without feeling like there was crushed glass in his lungs, he knew he had to get away from here, and he had to go now.

"I have to go," he gritted out, wincing as another wave of something he couldn't name—weaker, but still managing to make his skin feel taut, his soul watered down—rolled over him. His magic was surging. He had to get away from here, had to get to a place where he

could unleash himself— “Get her home,” Darien managed to say, waving a hand at Christa. “And don’t be dicks about it.”

Malakai called after him. “*Darien!*” The Reaper lurched to his feet as that unnamed power took its claws out of him too, Christa hurrying over to steady him.

But Darien was already running, sprinting through the city, nearly losing his footing on the pavement that had been blown up, chunks of it scattered across his path.

He ran and ran and ran, not stopping, heading straight for the Umbra Forum at the curve of the river way off in the distance. As he ran, he got his phone out and called Travis.

The line rang. Once. Twice.

And then, “What’s up, Dare?”

“I totaled your car,” Darien said, eyes now wholly black as the Surge fully grabbed hold of him. This time, when the need to rip his flesh off swept through his body, he started counting down. He had minutes left before he would need to unleash this magic. This rage. This—this *need*. If he didn’t make it to the Block on time, he would have to settle for the demons in the back alleys.

“*What?*” Travis spat.

“I’m sorry, I’ll get you a new one—”

“No, no, I don’t care about the car, Darien! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I need you to call Loren. Tell her I can’t see her tonight, it isn’t safe. I’ll call her tomorrow.” Worst goddamn timing in the world.

“What isn’t safe? Do you need help?”

“I’m having a Surge.”

“Dare—”

“I have to go.”

He hung up and ran faster, cutting through alleys, eyes seeing too much yet too little at the same time. Glowing spells rippled over buildings, the auras of people and demons showing through them. The farther he got from the street that had exploded under him, the better he felt, that keening sound no longer shrieking in his ears, the blood that was pumping through his veins no longer threatening to burst through his flesh and shower him in red.

But the Surge wouldn’t leave, its claws in too deep to extract.

It was the worst one he’d ever experienced. He had to get to the Chopping Block, had to save himself by killing something else. His monster needed to feed, and he would feed it.

Max had just stepped out of the shower, the bathroom in his suite at Hell's Gate full of billowing steam, when he heard his phone vibrating on the dresser in the bedroom.

He grabbed a white towel off the rack and wrapped it around his waist. Pushing his sopping hair back, he lumbered into the bedroom, wet feet slapping on hardwood. He peered at the phone rattling on the dresser, not recognizing the number displayed on the screen.

The call was about to go to voicemail when he picked up, thumb smearing water across the screen. "What's up?" he said.

"Get down here," came a deep, gravelly voice. It took Max a second to recognize it. The Butcher added, "I need you to kill your girlfriend."

Max's spine stiffened. "*What?*"

"If you don't, then I will."

"What in the gods' names is going on?"

"She was buying drugs."

—

There was only one way into Hell's Gate that wouldn't put Loren's family in danger, and that was the portal in the backyard. It was too risky to take a cab and walk through the front gates, so she used the spare syringe—one of three—and emptied the contents into her neck.

And then she hurtled through the weak spot in the academy library and made her way through the Veil, pinpricks of light and colored orbs swirling around her, Singer at her side.

The time on her clock was winding down to her final minutes when she finally spotted the pit that dropped into the Widow's den. The sight of it told her she wasn't far from the tree that would take her to Hell's Gate, but she had to hurry. Singer helped her navigate, barking to communicate, the sound rippling through the Divide. She felt like she was walking through an echo chamber.

Less than ten minutes on her clock remained when she spotted the gnarled tree roots hanging down from thin air. She peered up through the dark tangle, where a pocket of night sky in another realm sparkled way, way above.

Loren jumped, reaching for the tree roots, but they were too far

away, and she couldn't even graze one.

Seven minutes remained.

She looked down at Singer, who watched her with worry. "Can you give me a boost?"

Singer tossed his head as if to say yes, ears flopping. He planted his misty paws farther apart and slightly lowered his head, standing firm.

Loren backed up several paces and made a run for it. She jumped, planted her foot on Singer's solid back, and leapt up, hands reaching for the nearest root.

It slid through her grasp, notches and ridges ripping into her palm, but she held firm, swinging so she could grab it with both hands.

And then she pulled herself up. Up and up, she climbed, arm muscles burning, sweat trickling down her back. The night sky neared, and she felt Singer melt into her shadow.

Soon, a jasmine-scented breeze was caressing her face. She sucked it down into her aching lungs, nearly sobbing with relief that she had made it, and with barely two minutes to spare.

Her body melted into the colors of her aura as she passed from one realm into the next. Before she knew it, she was collapsing on the night-cool lawn of Hell's Gate, chest rising and falling with frantic breaths.

The lights were all on inside the house, the buttery glow spilling out the windows. It lit up the back deck, the hot tub, and the fire pit ringed with palm trees.

Loren got to her feet, pulled up her hood, and hurried around the house, lush green grass crunching underfoot.

She sprinted up the front steps, nearly stubbing her toe on a winged lion statue. She was about to open the door when Maximus beat her to it and stomped out into the night.

He froze, hand briefly drifting to his hip. "Fuck me, Calla. I almost blew your head off."

"Sorry."

As he headed for his SUV, she sidled past him and into the house. She quickly shut the front door, hoping like hell that no one was watching—and that no one recognized her if they were.

Loren pushed back her hood and rushed into the sitting room. Ivy, Jack, Logan, Sabrina, and Tanner were crowded around the television with bowls of popcorn and bags of candy. All of them looked surprised to see her, but she spoke before they had a chance to.

"Where's Darien? I need to see him."

Jack's eyes were glued to the screen. "He went to see Christa," he said absently.

Loren's head turned weightless, every thought in her head eddying into nothing.

Ivy smacked Jack in the shoulder. "You never learn!" she scolded. She faced Loren. "She had news for him, so he went to meet her in the Financial District."

That weightless feeling was still there, spreading through every limb. "Has anyone heard from him? Is he okay? I don't trust her—"

Thundering steps on the stairs had everyone turning toward the entrance hall.

Tanner grabbed the remote off the couch and hit pause just as Travis walked into the room, his face pale.

"Darien totaled my car," Travis said.

"*What?*" This exclamation came from several mouths.

Loren swayed, hands moving to grab the arm of the closest chair.

"It's on the news," Travis said. "Earthquake or something in the Financial District. He's fine, but he's having a Surge, said he was going to the Block—"

"The Block?" Loren bit out. "He's fighting at the *Chopping Block*?"

Travis's eyes settled on her, softening at the horror he saw there.

Tanner said, "He's been having a hard time, Loren."

"I didn't..." She shook her head. "I didn't know. I had no idea." It had been days. *Days*, and he was this much of a wreck.

Lace rounded the corner behind Travis, cell phone in hand, terror on her face as well. "I need you guys to help me. Dom just called—he said Blue disappeared. He took her down to the ocean—something about her magic, I didn't catch what he said, but they were attacked on their way back! We need to find her."

Everyone shot to their feet, popcorn and candy spilling across the rug, and grabbed their keys, jackets, and weapons.

Loren followed Lace into the entrance hall. Lace had her head in the closet as she found her boots and shoved her feet into them.

"Lace, can I come with you?" Loren asked. As Lace fastened the buckles on her boots, she tossed her head back to look at her, hair cascading down her back. Loren said, "I'll help you find Blue, and then I need to see Darien. Travis said he's at the Block." She couldn't go to him right away. Not when he was busy fighting, busy handling a Surge.

"My car's in the garage, here are the keys." She handed them to her. Perfect. She would be hidden in Lace's spell-protected car. "I'll be there in a second." She turned to the others. "Anyone else riding with us?"

"Logan and I will come," Sabrina said, Logan at her side. "We'll find her faster if we can split up."



As soon as Dallas caught sight of Max emerging from the shadows of the Umbra Forum, she turned stiff as a board.

He'd sped to get here as fast as possible, nearly hitting barricades and other vehicles as he competed with the traffic heading to and from the carnival. All of Angelthene Boulevard was blocked off for the event, the long road clogged with rides, performers, striped tents, food trucks, and thousands of people.

Max hated it. The inconvenience had ended up only pissing him off more, as if this whole fiasco with his girlfriend wasn't bad enough.

How could he have been so blind?

"Great." Dallas threw her hands in the air, wings rustling with irritation. "A goddamn interrogation!"

"It's not an interrogation, it's an intervention," Casen said. The warlock stood beside Dallas, his broad back to a metalworking vendor. The owner of the stall observed the scene with apprehension. The Butcher added, "There are people who care about you, kid. And we're not about to stand by and let you wreck your life."

Dallas bared her teeth, wings snapping out, stirring up garbage scattered across the grimy pavement. "You're one to talk, you BP-dealing piece of shit."

"That's enough!" Max barked. "Let's go, Dal." When she didn't move, he snarled, "Now."

She stomped past him, bumping his arm with hers.

Max resisted the urge to glare at her back. Instead, he called over his shoulder, "Thanks, Casen," before following her.

Dallas stayed several paces in front of him as she navigated the Umbra Forum. Max fought his rage as he tried to find the right words, the ones that wouldn't set her off and make her hightail it from him.

They had just left the market and were nearing the vehicles parked near the river when he found what he wanted to say.

"How long?"

Dallas still wouldn't look at him. "It's not what it looks like."

Max worked on his breathing as he followed her beside the river. He remembered back to all those times Dallas had asked him to drive her here, playing him for a fool. "You told me you were coming here

to buy enchanted stationary,” he said.

“I was.”

“Apparently, that’s not all you were buying.”

“You don’t even know the half of it, Max.”

“Then tell me.”

“No.” The word lashed out like the crack of a whip. He knew she meant for it to serve as a conversation ender.

Too fucking bad.

“I’m tired of this, Dallas. If you’re not going to talk to me, then I don’t know how this can work.”

Finally, her head turned to face him, though her feet still moved with purpose toward the SUV. “You don’t understand, okay?” There was panic in her voice. “I’m not using them recreationally, I’m using them to stay awake. My parents expect me to ace my classes and excel at the Fleet, and I’m too damn tired to do it without help.”

Max was silent for a while as he walked. Rage coursed through his veins, the force of it making his whole body tremble. He hadn’t suffered a Surge in a while, but he could feel one on the horizon. It was only a matter of time before he exploded. “Fuck your parents,” he bit out.

Dallas bristled. “Very helpful, Max. Maybe it’s easy for you to say because your parents aren’t around, but mine are, and they hardly want anything to do with me. Do you know what that feels like?”

“Actually, I do.” But this wasn’t about him. “And that’s why I say fuck your parents. They don’t deserve you.”

Dallas suddenly pivoted away. Heading *away* from the vehicle.

“Dallas!” he called.

She didn’t slow.

Max swore, hurrying after her. His next words were out before he could stop them. “Maybe you should quit pining for the affection of your hard-ass dad and pay attention to the people who care about you.”

Dallas whirled on a heel. Her eyes were wild, copper hair flying out around her like flames. “Oh yeah?” she hissed. “Like who?”

“ME!” he thundered, jabbing his chest with a finger. His face heated up with fury, the bands in his neck rigid. “*Me*, Dallas! That’s who!”

“You?” she scoffed.

“Yes. Me.”

“Why do you care so much, huh? Why?” She threw her hands out in question. “Why can’t you just mind your own business—”

His next words were shouts. “*Because I love you, that’s why!*”

She was too stunned to speak. She stared at him, mouth agape.

“I fucking love you, Dallas.” His lungs were strained, his throat raw

from yelling. “I don’t just love you, I’m crazy about you. But you’ve got your head so far up your ass, you can’t see what’s right in front of you.”

“I hate you.” Her voice was quiet, defeated. And even though he knew she didn’t mean it, the words stung. “I hate you for saying that.”

The hurt went away, and in its place was anger. “You hate me for saying that I love you?” The Surge crept closer, the trembling in his arms visible now, no longer in his head.

“Yes!” Her voice broke, and her eyes welled up.

“You know what, Dal? I’ve had it with your bullshit games. *I’m* breaking up with you.”

The words silenced Dallas. As Max looked at her, he saw two things happen.

One. A flame inside her went out. Died at the truth of his words—and the lack of hesitancy in them.

Two. A light came on in her head. The kind that appeared when a person’s judgment was no longer clouded.

The kind of light that flicked on the moment you realized what you’d lost and feared it was too late to save.

Dallas’s throat bobbed. “Max—”

An ear-splitting roar shook the Umbra Forum. The booming sound reverberated all the way over here, the river rumbling at his back.

Max’s head whipped toward the black market, magic and adrenaline sparking in his veins.

The ground quaked. Vehicles rattled. Streetlights buzzed, lightbulbs nearly popping.

Dallas’s voice was a hollow whisper. “What was that?”

—

Darien sat on the peeling bench in the empty change room of the Chopping Block, his gauze-wrapped hands clasped before him as he waited to be summoned.

There was a tightness in his chest, a sharp squeezing that hadn’t relented since he’d hurtled in here, barely making it in time for the next match. Coupled with the tightness was a curling sense of dread, a feeling that hadn’t left him alone since the night he’d walked into his suite to discover that Loren was gone. That awful memory was enough to make that glass-in-lungs sensation come back. He could barely draw a breath without his whole body trembling, fingers interlocking tightly.

The Chopping Block reeked worse than the Pit. But to be fair, more killing went on in these walls than in those of his usual haunt. The air held an odd perfume of vomit, blood, and sweat, all coated in the salt

of tears. There was an eerie presence in these walls, like a cold breath on the back of the neck, or a shadow moving in the corner of your vision that disappeared when you turned to look at it.

So much death. So many lost souls and sinners gambling for fleeting riches and recognition. A broken place for broken people.

People like him. Misery always did love company.

The door creaked as someone pushed it open. With his head bowed, Darien could see nothing of the person who entered, except a worn boot and the tattered corner of a trench coat.

“Ready to get that black out of your eyes?” said a deep, gravelly voice, the words echoing against the walls. Darien lifted his head to see the Butcher standing in the entrance of the change room, one beefy hand propping the door open.

“I was born ready.” Literally. When his mother had given birth to him, his eyes had been pure black. It had taken a solid three days before they’d turned blue.

With a tilt of his head, the Butcher gestured to the hallway and the arena beyond. “You’re up.”

Darien pulled his hoodie over his head and set it on the bench beside him, leaving him in a white long-sleeve, jeans, and boots. He pushed himself to his feet and strode across the room, cold puddles of water from the shower stalls splashing the hems of his pants.

He slowed his pace as he passed what was left of the mirrors over the sinks, the mosaic of shattered glass shining on the counter and tile flooring. He’d needed to re-wrap his hands with fresh gauze after that little outburst, and his knuckles still stung from the shards that had bit into his skin. So many tiny flecks of glass embedded in his flesh that he hadn’t bothered to dig out.

“You okay?” the Butcher asked. Darien didn’t have to look to know the warlock was staring at the mess of reflective glass. If he was pissed about it, he didn’t say anything. “I mean, aside from your usual demons.”

Darien tore his attention from the blood-spattered shards to find Casen studying him intently. “Never better.”

The Butcher held the door open for him, and together they began the long trek down the dingy hallway, the bars of fluorescent lights droning and flickering. Beneath these lights, everything was cast in a ghostly shade of blue that felt like being trapped in a fever dream.

“How’s that girl of yours doing, anyway?” Casen asked, his boots pounding out a tune separate from Darien’s. The question made Darien tense, lungs shrivelling beneath the squeezing of an invisible fist. The Butcher prompted, “She still around?” For someone who seemed so aloof and disinterested in the affairs of others, the Butcher sure had a way of digging right to the root of a person’s problems, as

if the thing that was eating at them couldn't be more obvious if it punched him in the face.

Darien shifted his shoulders and drew a breath. "She's around." He felt Casen's eyes flick in his direction. Darien kept his focus on the hallway stretching before him, the noise of the crowd surrounding the Chopping Block swelling to a roar.

"Alright, then." The Butcher cleared his throat. "Look, I never thought I'd say this, but if you can't catch a break after this fight, maybe you should take up therapy." A throaty laugh filled the hallway. He shook his head, hair swaying. "Fuck, therapy... I remember my days of that preachy garbage all too well. I was a lost cause." His dark eyes flicked to Darien again. "But maybe you're not. You ever been to see those Aura Healers at the General?"

Darien rolled his shoulders. "Tried them."

"What about those Caliginous Chambers?"

"I would, if I didn't have to go all the way to Yveswich. My cousin Roman uses them, and they work pretty well for him." Darien pushed his hair back with a sigh. "I've tried top doctors and therapists, every kooky bullshit remedy in the book." He squeezed his fingers into fists, the wounds in his knuckles splitting back open, fresh blood seeping into the gauze. "Nothing works. At least not for long." His next words slipped out before he could stop them. "Maybe I'm cursed."

"You're not cursed, Cassel. You're just a little fucked up." He bumped Darien in the shoulder with a fist. "But aren't we all?"

They rounded the corner that led to the arena, the caged octagon platform stretching before him. When he thought back to the first time he'd fought here, forced to settle a debt his sister owed the Butcher, it seemed like a millennia ago. There were days when he wished he could go back to that night, back to a time when he was still chasing after Loren instead of worrying about losing her. Back when he wasn't lucky enough to know what it felt like to have her. To love her.

Ten minutes, and all the fighters were in the ring. One of the bouncers closed the door of the cage, locking them inside. A thick layer of magic rippled over it, barely visible to the naked eye. No one was allowed in, and no one was allowed out. Some had tried to escape in the past, regretting their decision to fight—Darien had seen it happen a couple times himself—but there was no getting out once you were in. You either won by whatever means necessary, or you died.

Darien waited for the match to start, leaning back against the metal, arms crossed. Two of the workers were talking just outside the ring.

"It's going to be good, I'm telling you," the one was saying. "I hope you didn't bet on any of them because this thing is going to rip them apart." A delighted chuckle followed the man's words.

“What kind of demon is it?” asked the other.

The guy wheezed another laugh. “That’s the best part.” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them vigorously. “Nobody knows.”

Darien stiffened. Sound ceased and then sharpened, louder than before. Uneasiness pooled in his stomach as he pushed away from the metal and turned around. He looped his fingers through the latticework of the cage, feeling the spellwork slide over his skin like the touch of a ghost. He strained to hear the rest of what the men—both of them warlocks—were saying as the crowd began to cheer and stamp their feet.

“It’s bigger than a bear. Skin white as bone. No eyes.”

No eyes. Darien felt the blood drain from his face, dripping right down to his feet that were suddenly weightless.

The man went on, “Reeks like a corpse, this thing. Don’t let its size fool you; it’s faster than a werewolf and a hellseher combined.”

“HEY!” Darien banged a fist on the cage, ignoring the zing of the magic digging into the marrow in his bones. One of the men looked his way, followed by the other, both appearing miffed at the interruption. Darien shouted, “The hell did you just say?”

The men shared a smirk. The one who’d provided the information about the demon offered Darien a greasy smile. “I hope you enjoyed your last day alive, Cassel.” He gave a taunting wave of his filthy fingertips. “It’s been fun, but it’ll be more fun watching you get disemboweled.”

This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t possible—

“This demon,” Darien gritted out, his breaths coming in laboured gasps between clenched teeth. “Where’d they find it?”

The buzzer sounded, and the crowd exploded into ear-splitting cheers as the ring announcer shouted into a megaphone, welcoming the audience to tonight’s show.

The warlock walked up to the cage, close enough that Darien could just barely hear him over the booming voice of the ring announcer going over tonight’s performance. Fanning a stack of bills in his face, the man drawled, “I’m betting on the demon.” He leaned in close, so close that Darien could smell his breath, and hissed, “Welcome to hell.”

Darien’s fingers curled into the metal, gripping it tight. With a roar of anger, he shook the cage, the whole thing banging with the force. The man stumbled away from the magic that crackled in defiance, searing the air, and disappeared into the crowd.

That tightness in Darien’s chest turned into a spear of pain. It drove right through his heart, squishing the oxygen out of his lungs. The floor beneath his feet dipped, and the sounds of the crowd became a muted hum as a ringing began, deep in his ears.

The odds of getting out of here, of seeing Loren and his family again... He didn't want to know them.

Terror had gripped him so tightly that he could barely see, could hardly make sense of the faces in the crowd as he scanned them with a frantic gaze, looking, pacing inside the cage, the tips of his fingers catching in the metal as he moved.

And then he spotted him—the Butcher, standing near the south wall with two of his men.

Darien banged both fists on the cage. “*Casen!*” he shouted. “CASEN! CAAAASENNN!” He kept calling Casen’s name, kept banging, metal rattling with every blow. Magic zipped up his arms and crackled in his teeth, the smell of blown-out candles choking the air. But Casen didn’t hear, didn’t notice.

The trapdoor in the centre of the platform slid open with a whir.

A chill ran up Darien’s spine, raising the hair on the back of his neck. But he didn’t turn. He kept staring at Casen, willing him to look, to hear. To fix this before they were all dead.

Finally, the Butcher’s eyes locked with his over the heads of the crowd. His smile faltered, confusion washing across his face. He mouthed, “What’s going on?”

“STOP THE MATCH!” Darien bellowed. He gestured wildly over his shoulder, at the trapdoor that kept whirring, sliding open inch by inch. “CLOSE THE FUCKING DOOR!”

But the door kept opening, cold air drifting up from the cement enclosure deep below ground. Casen cupped a hand to his ear, his lips forming a sentence that looked something like, “I can’t hear you.” He gestured to the crowd and the music thumping from the speakers.

One of the men in the cage spoke. “What’s the matter, Cassel?” he taunted. “You scared?”

Darien turned. When the men grinning in the cage took in the look on his face, their smug smiles faded, the weapons they held—useless, all of them—falling slack at their sides as they put two and two together.

Something struck the underside of the floor, and several of the men nearly fell. They steadied themselves against the cage, muttering questions no one had answers to. The reek of fresh fear was worse than the sweat, worse than the odour coming off the oily skin of the monster lurking beneath their feet.

“I’m terrified,” Darien said, his words hollow as a drum. The door slid open all the way. A snarl that curdled his blood ripped through the building, silencing the cheering of the audience and the final words of the ring announcer. “And you should be, too.”

## PART IV

### COTTON CANDY CARNIVAL



The creature that leapt through the trapdoor was just like the one in Angelthene Academy, but bigger. Faster.

It ripped into the fighters in a white blur, pulpy blood and bits of flesh misting the air as it got to work. It took chunks out of them, swallowing limbs whole. It threw the contestants into the cage so hard, their spines snapped on impact. Darien barely felt it as a spray of blood and guts and who knew what else colored his skin and jeans like paint.

Five out of seven were dead in under thirty seconds, and just like that, there was no one left in the cage to kill except Darien—

And a sobbing warlock, who banged on the cage and screamed his throat raw, begging the gods he believed in to have mercy on his soul.

The creature ended the man in a flash, tearing into his chest cavity with one swipe of a huge claw.

It whirled toward Darien, its fleshy throat rumbling with a growl that traveled up from deep in its belly.

Rising up out of its half-crouch and to its full height, the monster clinked its blood-soaked claws together, the nose that was nothing but slits in its face twitching, picking up on the scent of its next kill.

Darien tried to think, but the words in his head tripped over themselves, and he was sweating bullets.

If he let this creature get in one strike, he would likely be done for. Its brute strength was something he had never seen, not in all his years of hunting every monster in the book. All his usual tricks, all his skills, every weapon he had ever wielded—they were useless against this thing. And if he didn't think of something, and quickly, he wouldn't be walking out of here tonight.

Shit, if he'd known this was going to be his last night alive, if he'd known he was going to face this nightmare...he would've done things differently.

But he was out of time to worry. Out of time to think of a plan because the monster was lunging for him with a maw of bloody teeth.

It was instinct alone that pushed his magic out of his body, forming a forcefield between himself and the creature.

The thing slammed into it, the impact rattling Darien's brain.

He stumbled back, steadying himself with a hand braced against the cage. His magic was an extension of himself, so the collision hurt as if someone had physically run into him on the street. It took all his willpower to keep that wall of magic in place, to not let it fall under the waves of pain rippling over him.

His boots slid back across the floor of the fighting ring, slipping through puddles of blood, until his back was pressed flat against the cage. He tensed every muscle in his body in effort to stay in place, to not have the spellwork covering the ring sear his flesh into smouldering chunks.

Eyes wide, breath tearing apart his lungs, Darien scanned the inside of the cage: the shredded body parts, the puddles of gore, the weapons that wouldn't do shit against this thing. He and the others had barely managed to kill the monster in AA's library as a team, and even then it'd only worked because he'd had a grenade. Alone? And *without* a grenade?

He stopped the thought before it could root itself in the melting mess of his mind, in his heart that was already breaking in half over this stupid mistake he'd walked into.

He had to kill it. He had to win, or he would never see Loren and his family again.

The creature kept slamming into his magic, roaring in anger, droplets of spit tinged with an oily black substance splattering the invisible wall, as if it were a window. For one horrible moment, Darien feared it would break through with nothing but its saliva, the way the thing at the Strangler Fig had melted through the magic of the Fleet bodysuit as if it were butter.

Curling his fingers into fists, Darien threw more of his magic out, expanding the barrier, forcing the demon back, back, back. It dug its clawed feet into the floor, ripping the canvas into shreds.

Darien kept pushing, nostrils flaring, chest heaving with the force—until the creature's protruding spine was pressed up against the far wall of the cage. The magic keeping them contained in the ring singed the thing's otherworldly flesh until it was steaming. It howled in pain, thrashing against Darien's hold.

*"Darien!"* Casen's voice cut into his focus. The Butcher was at his back, banging on the cage. "Cassel, are you hearing me, you deaf fuck?!"

*"What?"* Darien's voice lashed out like a whip. "I'm a little busy, in case you couldn't tell!"

"What do you want me to do?" It was the first time Darien had ever heard fear in the Butcher's voice; he nearly didn't recognize him. "If I shut off the spells—"

Darien looked over his shoulder at Casen, whose features were obscured by the latticework of the cage. "Don't!" Darien bit out, rivulets of sweat trickling down his temples. "You can't let that thing out of here, or we're all dead."

*"You're going to be dead as soon as you run out of magic!"*  
Magic.

*Magic...*

Darien's head whipped forward. For a moment that lasted a lifetime, he watched the creature, writhing under the tethers of his hold—his magic. The magic that used to be invisible, but was now a transparent black wall undulating like smoke. It curved around the monster, shadowy chains holding it in place.

"Get me Stygian salts," Darien barked over his shoulder. "And Venom. Lots of them—now." With an outward thrust of his hand, he threw another wave of power into the creature, pinning it harder against the cage, the metal at its back bending under the force.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he became aware of Casen shoving a plastic bag through the cage, swearing under his breath as it barely fit through the opening. The spells only covered the latticework of metal, allowing the object to fit through.

Darien caught it before it could hit the floor, fingers trailing in a puddle of blood. He pulled the bag open, nearly tearing the plastic, and shook a pile of salts into his palm. He held it up to his nose and snorted them, airways burning as the crystals shot up and into his system. And then he took the small bottle of Venom that Casen had thrown in with the bag of salts, unscrewed the cap, and dripped two drops into each eye.

His blood immediately electrified with the effect, heat spreading through his veins. A feeling of buoyancy lifted the weight off his chest, allowing him to regain control of his mind, to think clearly through the panic. Closing his eyes, he felt his lungs become a little fuller, his heart a little slower, his mind a little calmer.

When he opened them again, they were black. Solid black, his magic at full capacity.

Pushing away from the cage, away from the Butcher who was yelling something at him that he didn't hear, he stalked toward the creature, treading on body parts that squished and bubbled with blood beneath the soles of his boots.

Summoning every bit of magic he had in him, Darien began an assault on the creature. He threw all his power into it, every bit of force he could scrounge up, ripping into it like no bullet or blade could do.

The cage at its back kept bending and bending, warping to the shape of its body. The spellwork screamed as if it were alive, as if it, too, was struggling to contain this thing. An awful screeching and groaning carried through the room, the monster's screams blending with the shriek of distorting metal and strained magic.

Darien pushed himself harder, driving the creature's body further into the cage, the undulating shadows of his magic expanding like spilled ink. The reek of burning flesh coated the inside of his nostrils

and throat.

A wild scream tore out of the demon, and suddenly it leapt forward and struck, breaking through the wall of Darien's magic. The shield he'd thrown up fell instantly, like glass shattered by a fist, smoke dropping to the floor and curling away.

The monster leapt over him.

Darien ducked, falling forward to the floor of the Chopping Block with a crash that rattled his bones.

The creature burst through the roof of the cage, completely obliterating the metal and the spells holding it in here. The spells were gone, nothing left of them but a wisp of smoke and a smattering of glowing specks, like sparks from a fire.

Where he was sprawled on the floor of the cage, Darien gaped.

It wasn't possible. At least, it shouldn't be.

The monster was in the crowd, ripping into people who screamed and ran for their lives. It took out half the audience on its way to the doors, throwing them into the walls so hard, their spines broke in half.

And then it ripped those doors right off the hinges. Wood and steel exploded into the night-darkened marketplace of the Umbra Forum as it took off into the city.

Darien jumped to his feet. He was through the warped hole at the top of the cage and landing on the cement floor beside the ring before he knew what he was doing.

Casen stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, fingers grasping his filthy shirt. "Have you lost your damn mind?!" he thundered. "You're not actually going after that thing!"

"If I don't, then who will?" Darien demanded, nostrils flaring.

The Butcher's hand fell from his shoulder. "You're serious. You crazy bastard, you're serious."

A warlock who worked for the Butcher ran over to them. "It's heading for Angelthene Boulevard," he panted. "They've got the whole road closed off for the carnival." Eyes that were alit with terror flashed to the Butcher. "There are thousands of people there, man."

The carnival.

*Shit.* Families were there. Children.

Darien faced Casen. "You got a burner?"

The Butcher asked no questions before finding one in the pocket of his trench coat and handing it to Darien. Darien dialed quickly.

The phone rang. As it rang, Darien said to the Butcher, "Where'd you find it? The demon."

"Baited it in the sewers. Used—"

Travis picked up. "Who's this?" The two words crackled from bad reception.

"Trav, it's me."

“Darien?”

“Did you talk to Loren? Where is she?”

He didn’t hear the question. It was either that or Darien didn’t hear him address it. “We’re looking for Blue...” *crackle* “...Dominic and Blue...” *crackle* “...attacked...” *crackle* “...we’re at the carnival...”

Darien’s blood drained from his face. “Get out of there, Trav!” He started pushing his way to the door, stepping over bodies and debris, shoving hysterical people aside as he moved.

“What’s going on?” The question was nearly cut off as the call threatened to drop.

“There’s a demon heading straight for the boulevard!” Darien bellowed. “You need to get everyone out, do you hear me?”

Travis cursed. He tried to say something else, but the call nearly dropped again.

“Now, Trav!” Darien barked, hoping like hell that Travis heard the warning. “*Now! Right fucking now!*”

—

Where he stood beside Dallas, not far from the river, Max’s eyes turned black. Fast as he could, he sifted through the endless muddled auras crowding the black market, searching for the source of that blood-curdling roar.

Something was heading this way. Something big. Powerful.

But it had no aura.

Max had no time to consider how that was possible, because it was barreling straight for them.

Whiter than bone. Big as his SUV.

It was a monster just like the one in the library of Angelthene Academy, except bigger. Swifter. A force of nature, it downed everything in its path. Stalls were smashed into smithereens, splinters of wood and metal slicing through the air. People were killed with swipes of claws and a barbed tail, blood and guts misting walls and sidewalks.

“Dallas, *get back!*” Max grabbed her and leapt behind the closest vehicle, covering up her body with his, just as the thing jumped.

It landed on the car, windows shattering, tires popping from the force and immense weight. Bits of gravel, metal, and rubber flew.

As Max watched the creature’s shadow, defined by a streetlight, he used his magic to build up a wall around him and Dallas, shielding them from being scented or heard.

The thing snuffled, foul breath puffing out in white streams.

Max didn’t dare move. One of his hands was covering Dallas’s mouth, the other clutching her to his body.

Finally, the thing stopped showing interest, their scents lost in the chill wind.

It threw its head back and roared, the sound shattering all streetlights in the area. Glass showered the asphalt.

Max ducked his head, Dallas doing the same against him, tucking her own under his chin.

The creature took off into the night, heading straight for Angelthene Boulevard. It cleared the freeway with a mighty leap, vehicles swerving out of shock. When it hit the ground on the other side, smaller demons fled, the streetlights off in the distance rumbling from its heavy gait.

Max eased up off the ground, glass fragments tinkling as they slid off him and hit the pavement.

Dallas stood too. "What was that thing?" she whispered, shaking glass out of her hair.

That was when Max saw Darien.

Covered in blood, his jeans and long-sleeve practically black with it, he was sprinting out of the market. He almost ran right by when Max called his name.

*"Darien!"*

Darien stopped, boots skidding. His eyes—black, a webbing of the same shade surrounding them—were wild as he found Max and Dallas standing by the pulverized car.

"It's heading straight for the carnival," Darien said, the words strained between panting breaths. "I have to stop it."

The carnival. Bloody hell.

Dallas shrieked, *"You're going after that thing?"*

"I'm coming with you," Max said. "The others are at the carnival."

"I know, I just talked to Trav." He looked like he was about to bolt, and maybe Max shouldn't have said it, but he did anyway.

"Loren's with them."

Darien's face went white. *"What?"* he snapped.

"She came by the house a little while ago. She was looking for you."

By the time Max had finished his sentence, Darien was already running.

—

The flashing lights of the carnival were dizzying.

While Loren had once found the tinkling music, the colorful lights, and the din of voices exhilarating, they were only a distraction tonight, the place too loud and far too crowded, bodies everywhere.

The place was stuffed full with rides—bumper cars, carousels,

rollercoasters, a Ferris wheel. There was apple bobbing, balloon-and-dart games, water gun and crossbow games, ring toss, plastic ponds filled with rubber ducks. Werewolves who swallowed silver swords, venefica fire eaters, diving acts, daredevil shows. The cool evening air was weighed down with the scents of fried dough, funnel cake, cotton candy, caramel apples, potato wedges, hot cider and chocolate. So many smells, it was a wonder Sabrina was able to separate them.

An hour had to have passed, and there was still no sign of Blue. But Sabrina and Logan were tracking her scent with success. The trail Blue had left behind when she'd fled from the attack had yet to lead them out of the carnival, which meant she must be hiding somewhere in here, among the labyrinth of food trucks, vendors, and rides.

Lace's eyes were a gleaming onyx as she scanned the area, using her Sight to periodically check on the others, who were conducting their own search at the other end of the boulevard.

It was just Loren, Lace, and Sabrina here, Logan aiding the rest of the group. As soon as they'd made it to the carnival, they had split up to cover ground faster. Sab and Logan were both in their human forms, but despite this their wolf senses were just as strong as they were when they walked on four legs. Although a werewolf's scenting ability was a far weaker method of tracking than the Sight, Loren could tell from the look on Sab's face that they were in the right area.

Before they'd split up, Dominic had explained what happened. As a genetically modified hellseher with elemental magic, Blue could only go so long without recharging, so to speak. She couldn't stay away from the ocean for long. And when they'd left Capricorn Beach and were flying above the carnival, they were attacked. Blue had fled, and Dominic had killed the men. He hadn't recognized any of them, nor had they been carrying any identification.

Sabrina's eyes glowed like two fiery suns as she poked Loren in the side. "Menagerie of Misfits?" she whispered.

The Menagerie of Misfits was a network of blue-and-white striped tents up ahead, where animals of all kinds were kept in cages for entertainment.

Under any other circumstances, Loren would never have entered such a building. Unless it was due to a medical reason, the last thing she wanted to see were animals kept in someplace other than their natural habitats, but she didn't hesitate this time as she followed Sabrina into the tents. According to the sign, the exhibit was closed for the next hour.

What better place for a frightened person to hide than here?

Lace took her spot behind Loren, guarding her back. "Don't wander off," she whispered. "I don't feel like facing Darien's wrath later."

"No problem," Loren whispered back. There was no way she would

stray from either of them in a crowded place like this.

The interior of the tents was dark, save the murky light filtering from the giant tanks and terrariums. Animals of all kinds slept or paced in cages. There were tigers, lions, bears, wolves, snakes. So many animals.

It was in the second tent—the one that housed a large assortment of aquatic life—where they found Blue. She was sitting on the wet floor between two tanks, one stuffed with piranhas, the other home to a giant water serpent, much like the ones that swam through Angelthene River. Her knees were tucked up to her chin, arms wrapped around her legs.

“Blue?” Loren called softly.

When she spotted them, a strangled cry of relief floated from her blue-tinted lips. She shot to her feet, tugging them all into an embrace. “I was so scared,” she whispered, teeth chattering. Her clothes were soaked, her wet hair dripping down her back. “I needed to see the ocean. My element— I needed to charge, but I lost Dominic —”

“We know,” Lace said, her arms tightening around them. “It’s alright, Blue. You’re safe now.”

Sabrina added, “Dominic is here. We’ve been looking for you.”

“We should go,” Loren said, extracting herself from Blue’s bruising grip. “You can’t be seen.”

They had just pushed through the heavy flap of the tent when a roar swept through the carnival, silencing the chatter of families and groups of friends waiting in line at rides and food trucks. Carnival tunes tinkled through the street, the cheery music forming a spine-chilling contrast with the sound that brought to a halt every person in the area.

Fear choked the boulevard. Faces turned to each other, mouths murmuring in question.

That was when the civil defense siren started wailing.

Loren’s conduit flared with light, the glow brighter than every flashing bulb. Brighter than the Ferris wheel that had come to a standstill, every pod filled with couples and friends. Children.

There was a tug in Loren’s chest, as if the amulet was trying to tell her something. It felt just like that night at the academy, when she had followed the directions of her conduit to the swimming pool.

The night she had been drawn to that creature—the thing that had slipped through the rip in the library. The bruise in the Divide.

Lace, Sabrina, and Blue turned toward Loren, their eyes snagging on the solar pendant shining through her shirt.

“Something’s here,” Loren whispered. “I think it’s looking for me.”



---

Max booked it through the carnival, shoving people aside as he ran. Dal was still at the Umbra Forum, protected by the spells on the SUV.

Safe. She was safe. As for himself, he had to focus.

He and Darien had split up to find the others. They were using their watches to communicate, since cell reception was shit at carnivals. Too many rides, too many people, too much interference.

Too bad none of the others were wearing theirs.

Max looked for the Devils, using his Sight to track them, while Darien went after Loren. After pinpointing a few of their auras, he concluded Logan was with Jack, Tanner, Ivy, and Trav, but he couldn't see Sab, Lace, or Loren. They weren't with the rest of the group.

"Fuck meeee," Max ground out, running faster. He wouldn't be able to see Loren with her Avertera talisman on, but he knew she was with the other three. They wouldn't have let her go off on her own.

Darien was shouting through his watch, his voice barely audible over the din of the carnival. *"It's by the fucking Ferris wheel!"*

People were screaming. Running away.

Max raced toward the place they were vacating, droves of fleeing bodies holding him back. He felt like a fish swimming upstream as he pushed through, craning his neck to see above the crowds.

His blood ran cold as he caught sight of the monster.

It was chasing something.

A glimpse between two spinning rides in the distance showed him four people, all of them girls, fleeing from the monster's attacks. One of those people had blue hair.

Three were separated from the fourth. The fourth was the person the creature wouldn't leave alone, as if it were drawn to her.

That person was Loren fucking Calla.

---

There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide.

The white-scaled demon with black pits for eyes was coming after her. Loren didn't know how or why, but there was no time to think about that. Her conduit wouldn't stop glowing, white and rainbow light bursting out of it in sparkling streams. The skin between her breasts burned from the scalding temperature of the solar amulet every time it struck her, bouncing with every step as she attempted to put distance between her and the creature.

Lace, Blue, and Sabrina were following, the latter still in her human form. They were screaming and shouting, trying like hell to

create a diversion and give her time to get away. Lace fired shots from her pistol, every single one of them precise—but they all bounced off the creature, as if those bullets were made of rubber.

Loren knew it was only a matter of time before the creature would tire of the chase. The only thing keeping her alive was the maze of buildings, food trucks, tents, and rides, the structures providing enough of a deterrent to keep the demon at a distance.

Wood splintered and metal flew as the wicked thing tore every structure down with powerful swipes of massive claws, barbed tail lashing through the air like a whip. Poisonous sickles shot off that tail, thudding into wood and metal with horrific force, more of those spikes growing through the impenetrable flesh of its tail within seconds.

*Stop running*, came a slithering voice.

Loren's breaths rasped as she ducked between two food trucks, being careful to keep her feet light.

Did that thing just speak to her?

She moved faster, a metallic taste clinging to the back of her throat from how long she had been running. Dead bodies threatened to trip her as she moved. Eyes frozen with death stared up at her, their faces white. The metallic reek of blood mingled with the aromas of salted pretzels and deep-fried chicken, the medley of contradicting smells making her gag.

Loren rounded a vast striped tent, the string lights draped across the awning blinking in tune with the fast tempo of a carnival melody.

*I will make it quick*, said the voice. The words made her head feel uncomfortably full. When she was hearing them, there was hardly any space left for her own thoughts. *You are what he has been looking for*.

Loren's blood ran cold. But she kept moving, not slowing for one second. She'd lost sight of the monster, but she knew better than to think it had given up. If anything, it could likely see her precise location.

The thought gave her an idea.

She reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out her bottle of Venom. Not missing a step as she wove through the destruction of the carnival, she tipped her head back and dripped a drop into each eye, blinking rapidly as it stung on impact.

Her eyes turned white, and her temples pulsed as white webbing spread through them.

*What who has been looking for?* she asked, picking up her pace, shoving the Venom back into her pocket.

The thing didn't answer.

Loren dared a glance over her shoulder—

The Venom did not distort her vision the same way the Sight

distorted a hellseher's. In fact, her surroundings hardly looked different, except she could see the giant monster now. Could see its aura, as if she were a hellseher.

It was creeping low to the ground behind several gaming booths filled with stuffed animals, its form a muddy, quivering glow.

Loren kept moving, using her knowledge of its whereabouts to her hidden advantage, hoping the thing wouldn't see right through her.

She was nearing the Ferris wheel again, having gone around in circles trying to get away, when she spotted Sabrina, Blue, and Lace several yards to the east.

Loren lifted a finger to her lips.

When she turned back around to look for the creature, it was gone.

Her head swivelled in panic. She searched for its aura, heart racing, lungs aching with stress and exertion. The Ferris wheel kept turning at her back, merry music bobbing through the night.

*Found you.* That awful voice floated into her head.

"Where are you?" The question was a shaky whisper.

*Look up.*

Her whole body turned ice cold as her head inched upward...

She didn't even have a chance to scream before the monster—its body camouflaging with the Ferris wheel it was perched upon—attacked.

With an ear-shattering snarl, it leapt for her throat.

—

Darien hadn't stopped running since he'd left the Chopping Block. He searched frantically for Loren, tracking the auras of the Devils who he thought might be with her.

He caught sight of her before he saw the monster. Caught sight of her just as Max got there, sprinting to her side, where he grabbed her by an arm. Max, who didn't know how to use his magic like Darien did.

A shout of warning ripped out of Darien's lungs as the creature leapt off the Ferris wheel, heading straight for them, claws outstretched.

Darien ran like hell, closing the distance at a speed faster than he had ever moved.

He put himself in front of them at the last second, boots skidding.

Shadowy magic lashed out of him, striking the demon like whips.

It bellowed in agony as it collided with the smoky black wall—

The thing fell back, smashing the whole Ferris wheel into pieces.

Debris showered the air. Darien's magic sputtered as he shielded himself, Loren, and Max from the assault.

The monster was back up again in an instant, swiping aside broken pieces of the ride.

It was angry.

With a lashing of a barbed tail, it struck through his magic, felling it in an instant, leaving them all vulnerable and defenseless.

“*RUN!*” Darien bellowed. “Get out of here!”

The whole world went silent. There was a shift in the air—the kind that set every nerve in Darien’s body on fire.

A shift that could only mean the use of magic. Magic that wasn’t his.

The end of his world should’ve come. He should be dead, but—

The creature was frozen in place. Darien had the sense that time had stopped, but while the thing’s massive body stayed suspended in midair, the rest of the world kept moving. Carnival rides continued to spin, lights twinkling sporadically. Music continued to play. The civil defense siren still wailed, the bone-chilling sound scraping up the length of his spine.

Darien turned—

Loren stepped up to his side. She held her right hand out before her, fingers splayed, her conduit glowing like a golden sun. Her eyes were solid white, and there were colors shining there, faint shades of the rainbow, as if her tears had transformed into multicolored paint.

Loren’s words were directed at the demon she held frozen in the grip of her magic. She was speaking in—

In another language. Ilevyn.

And then she said, “Don’t fucking touch him.”

Darien’s mind spun. “Loren?” he breathed.

“Kill it,” she ground out.

She didn’t need to tell him twice.

With an outward thrust of his hand, whole body trembling with exertion, Darien unleashed himself on the monster. Magic swept from his core, barrelling into the creature’s body in a wave of endless black. There was no time for weapons; this was his only hope.

The creature roared, straining to break free of Loren’s hold. It reached out a trembling claw, blood dripping from lethally sharp nails.

Darien pushed harder, envisioning cracking open the creature’s skull with his bare hands. He held those hands out in front of him, fingers curling in empty air, pushing outward—as if he really was cracking its head open. Dark fog threaded between his fingers.

Venom leaked out of his eyes like black ink, but he didn’t stop. Blood trickled from his nose and ears, but he didn’t stop. His blood vibrated, and his brain swelled, but he didn’t stop.

He wouldn’t stop.

The creature's skull split open with a strident *crack*, brains and blood spraying the air like red rain. Loren flinched, blinking away her strange vision, as the thing's limp body collapsed to the ground, shaking every structure in the carnival. A puddle of oozing teal seeped out from under the corpse, mixing with the blood flowing from its destroyed head.

Everyone was silent for three heartbeats. There wasn't a sound in the area but heavy breathing and thundering hearts.

Blue, Lace, and Sabrina approached with caution.

Max was the first to speak. All he said was Darien's name on a quiet breath, so quiet Loren could barely hear it.

It took Darien a moment to turn around, and when he did, he was swaying in place. His shoulders heaved, every breath a laboured pant. His clothes were soaked with blood, the white fabric of his shirt and the blue denim of his jeans black with it.

"Is everyone okay?" Darien gritted out. "Is anyone hurt?"

The sight of his face sent Loren's heart zipping up her throat.

Those eyes of his were bloodshot, the skin around them webbed with black. A substance that looked like black ink swam in the whites of his eyes and irises, spilling over his lower lids when he blinked. Streams of it ran down his cheeks like dark tears.

Mixed in with the black was scarlet liquid.

Blood.

The ground dipped beneath Loren's feet. "Darien—"

Loren barely finished saying his name before his legs gave out, and he fainted. He fell forward onto the ground—too fast for anyone to do anything, to react or catch him.

His face smashed into the pavement with a sickening *thwack*.

Blood pooled. A lake of red trickled through the cracks in the road and seeped toward her shoes.

It did not stop spreading.

Darien woke up with a pounding headache.

Someone was speaking to him, but he couldn't make sense of a single word. The voice was distant. Slightly metallic and unfamiliar. When he tried to find the source of it, he was met with a blur of color and light that stung like little needles thrust deep into his eye sockets.

Wincing, he threw up a hand to block it, gut churning. There was a sheen of sweat on his skin, making his shirt and tattered jeans cling to his body in an itchy and uncomfortable way.

"He's awake, but he's not responding." The words echoed, the volume of them far too loud.

He flinched and turned his face into something cool and soft. A leather cushion, he realized. A couch?

"Darien, I'm here." This voice, he would recognize anywhere. It could wake him from the dead, he was certain. Maybe he *was* dead. But if this was death, if *she* was here, then it wasn't so bad. That sweet, gentle voice kept speaking, and he felt a hand glide through his hair. "You're home, Darien. You're safe. You're safe."

Home? That explained the couch. He tried to open his eyes again, but the room—what he assumed was the sitting room at Hell's Gate—spun and spun and spun and spun and—

Fuck.

He must've cursed out loud, because those delicate fingers were threading through his hair again.

Finally, he was able to look up at the face staring at him in concern, able to take in his bearings without feeling like he was ensnared inside a spinning top.

Those eyes were the color of the bluest ocean. And that splash of freckles on her nose...damn, were they cute.

"Darien." Golden hair wreathed the angel's pretty face like a halo. As she turned to look at someone else in the room, that hair swung, draping across his wrist with a touch that tickled. "Doctor Atlas?" The murmur of other voices quieted down. "Doctor Atlas, he's awake."

Footsteps that were too loud had him shrinking into the couch cushions, teeth grinding hard.

And then a voice said, "Step aside for a moment, Loren."

Darien's hand closed around the angel's wrist. "She stays," he slurred around a clumsy tongue. His throat was dry as a desert, voice

raspy. With a heavy swallow, he repeated, "She stays."

Loren shifted about a foot away, but stayed seated beside him, her wrist still in his grip, her other hand resting on his stomach. Darien was vaguely aware of a bright light being shone in his eyes, and then his temperature was being taken. Somewhere along the way, he shut his eyes and began to drift into unconsciousness...

He only came to when the couch shifted with someone's departure

---

"I'm still here," Loren said. Indeed, her wrist was still in his hand—the hand that had tightened the moment he'd thought she was leaving. Was he squeezing too hard? The cushions dipped again as she shuffled closer, moving her free hand to press it flat against his forehead. "How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

"I'm alive," he managed. "Unfortunately."

He sensed Loren frowning. "What do you mean *unfortunately*?"

"Life's hard, sweetheart. Especially when you're not around." He peeked up at her. When the room spun again, he closed his eyes, hating that his dizziness was keeping him from looking at her. He'd longed to have her beside him again for...fuck, what seemed like a lifetime. But in reality, not even two weeks had passed. How could he ever handle a longer length of time without her? Darien swallowed. "Don't get me wrong, I don't want to die, but some days I don't really enjoy being alive either." He wasn't sure where this was coming from, but something told him he should be keeping these thoughts to himself, instead of burdening Loren with them.

"Don't talk like that," Loren scolded mildly, her hand cupping his jaw. "Don't ever talk like that."

"You're the light in my dark," he said thickly. "My reason for living."

Her fingers lightly moved across his jaw. "You're mine too."

"I guess fainting is the key to getting your attention now," Darien joked with a smirk. This time, when he opened his eyes, that pretty face stayed still. He drank in the sight of those doe-like eyes, that full mouth, those rosy cheeks. "I'll have to remember that."

When Loren's mouth wobbled, the space between her brows scrunching up, Darien's smile faded.

He gave her hand the best squeeze he could manage in this state, his fingers so weak he could barely move them. "I'm just teasing, baby."

"Look, Darien..." She fidgeted, her fingers trembling faintly on his jaw. He wanted to take them into his hand and kiss every single one, but it felt like he didn't have full control of his body. "About what happened at the hospital—"

"You don't need to explain yourself. You're allowed to have

friends.”

“That’s not what it was about, Darien. He’s not...he’s not even my friend.” Darien wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but he wasn’t about to let himself think about it.

“I said you don’t need to explain yourself.”

“But I want—” She seemed to choke on her words. Her throat bobbed, and her eyes gleamed.

“Don’t cry.” His thumb brushed across the pulse in her wrist, the motion causing the charms on her bracelet to jingle. The bracelet he’d purchased for her. Seeing her still wearing the gift made him stupid with happiness. As he nudged the charm of the Mortar and Pestle with his small finger, he took note of Loren watching him, those eyes still shining with the tears she was holding back. “We’ll talk about it another time, okay?” he said gently. “Besides, my head is killing me.” He glanced around the sitting room, tipping his head back far enough to see the empty kitchen. At some point these past few minutes, everyone had vacated the area, leaving him alone with Loren.

And then the doorbell rang. *Piss-poor timing.*

“Can someone get that?” Darien called, voice echoing faintly against the vaulted ceiling. Loren made to stand, but Darien held her wrist firm, trapping the bracelet between his skin and hers, the charms warm from their body heat. “Not you, baby. Someone else can get it.”

The doorbell rang again, triggered by whoever was at the gate.

“I’ll go,” Loren said, the words thick with reluctance. But she stopped pulling against his grip when the sound of footfall echoed from the second floor.

Max thudded down the stairs and strode over to the screens displaying the security camera feeds. “What’s this now?” he muttered. He slammed his finger onto the intercom button. “We’re not interested in buying any cookies or switching internet providers or subscribing to magazines unless they’re the kind with photographs of naked women. If you’re the same vacuum cleaner salesman as the last guy, kindly screw off. Thank you, and have a nice day.”

“I’m looking for Darien Cassel,” said a female voice.

Max looked over his shoulder, his eyes locking with Darien’s. Loren tensed beside him, likely jumping to the worst conclusion possible, as she so often did. Darien couldn’t exactly blame her, not after the awful thoughts that had assaulted *his* mind when he’d walked into the hospital room to find her hand in the grip of another man. He was a fool in love, but so was she.

“My name is Tamika Isley,” the woman continued. “He came to see me at Angelthene Optometry. If you would kindly let me in, I can explain why I’m here.”

Max was still staring at him. He mouthed, “You went to see an eye



doctor?"

"It's a long story," Darien mouthed back.

"What about our address being top-secret?" Max hissed.

"I forgot to get Tanner to erase it," he whispered.

"Rookie mistake." Yeah, it was, but he'd had a lot of shit to keep up with these last few days.

"You can get angry with me when my head stops hurting." Darien waved a prompting hand, the motion nauseating him. "Let her in."

Max flicked the button that would open the gate.

A moment later, the faint sound of gravel crunching under tires reached his keen ears. Every sound was amplified by his headache, every light too bright, every touch—except Loren's—unbearable. Darien wanted nothing more than to lock himself in a dark and soundless room with his girl and forget the world for an hour or a year. They had a lot of lost time to catch up on, and very little of it at their disposal. At least, that was what it felt like.

But then a car door opened, and heels struck the front steps. Max shot Darien one last disbelieving look before he swung open the front door of Hell's Gate, and Tamika Isley walked into the house.

---

With Doctor Tamika Isley now perched on the smaller sofa in the sitting room, looking equal parts frightened and awed by the house known as Hell's Gate, Loren realized there was a lot she'd missed during her time away from her family.

The others were here now too. All seven of the Devils, Doctor Atlas, Blue and Dominic, Sabrine and Logan. There wasn't enough furniture in the room for everyone, so several people leaned against walls or sat on the carpet. Dallas was also here. Loren sensed tension between the witch and Max, the two throwing glances at each other from opposite sides of the crowded room.

Only a week had passed. How had she missed so much?

Tamika began by sitting up straighter, clearly unsettled by how many people were watching her—and who most of those people were. Her first words were for Darien, who was still lying down after Doctor Atlas had scolded him for trying to move, Loren sitting beside him.

"I'm going to be blunt," Tamika began.

"Blunt is good," Darien said. "I'm blunt. I like blunt people." The hand that was wrapped around Loren's fingers tightened slightly. She knew the squeeze was meant to comfort her. It made her wonder if he noticed her pulse was racing. "We're all ears."

"Well." Tamika drew a deep breath. "Your appointment caught me off guard. I've never seen a hellseher schedule an eye exam before, so

to be completely honest with you, I thought you were there because someone dared you, or maybe you were pulling a prank.”

Jack snickered. “That sounds like something I would do.”

Ivy shushed him.

Tamika went on, “But when the news started reporting the animal deaths and illnesses all over the city, and I started seeing frost on my car when I left for work in the mornings, I decided to do some digging. You said you’ve been seeing these creatures near the Crossroads?”

“Some of them,” Darien said.

“Back in old times, people used to visit the Crossroads to speak to loved ones who had passed away. They would go on the shortest night of the year, when the divide between our world and the spirit realm is rumored to be at its thinnest. The divide is often called the Veil. If a Crossroads wasn’t handy, a person could seek out a weak spot by going to a place of heavy darkness, or perhaps an area where elements meet with constant movement, such as waterfalls.”

Jack interrupted. “Aren’t those just bedtime tales?”

“Jack,” Dom and Travis warned, their voices thick with discontent.

The jokester of a Devil pretended to zip his mouth shut and tossed the invisible key over his shoulder.

Tamika looked unimpressed, her lips set in a thin line.

“I apologize for my rude brother-in-law,” Darien said. “Please continue.”

Tamika cleared her throat. “Where was I?”

Tanner offered, “Relatives and friends of the dead visiting the Crossroads on the shortest night of the year.”

“Right.” Tamika crossed her legs. “Visiting the Crossroads has always come with a cost, even back then. The person had to pay a toll to the guardian of the Crossroads they chose to visit. Most of the time the payment came in the form of—”

“Coins,” Darien said.

“Right. Do you know the history behind paying with coins?”

“I’ve heard things here and there, but I’m more interested in what you have to say.”

Tamika glanced about the room. “I’m sure you’re all aware of the tradition of placing silver coins over the closed eyes of a person who’s passed away?”

Everyone nodded.

“The coins serve as payment. The Crossroads creatures exist in pockets between our world and Spirit Terra. When the Veil was cast thousands of years ago, these creatures got trapped in these pockets, unable to commit to life in any of the three realms. Supplying them with silver coins briefly weakens the barrier between here and the

spaces of liminality, allowing us to temporarily cross over into their habitats, sort of like how dead bodies will cross the river once silver has been paid.”

“Makes sense,” Logan offered, sharing a look with Sabine.

“I believe these creatures you’ve been seeing are pushing through the Veil,” Tamika said. “Somehow, your Sight—” She nodded in Darien’s direction. “—has picked up on their presence before they’ve fully made it through. And I believe the Veil is weakening. Bleeding into our world.”

“Then we need to figure out why,” Lace said. “If Spirit merges with our world...” She shuddered. “Who knows what will happen?”

“Death,” Tamika concluded. “Death will happen. You’ve seen it—we’ve all seen it. All these animals dying, people falling sick with mysterious illnesses. Even bodies of water are turning stagnant or filling with blood. If Spirit fully becomes one with our world, it doesn’t have the means to support life—it is a place of death, of the in-between. Everyone currently living will die.”

“How was I able to see the creatures before anyone else?” Darien asked. “I saw one when I was with a few Reapers, and none of them could see it.”

Tamika drummed her fingers on her knee. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe you are somehow connected to the spirit realm.”

Loren shared a glance with Darien that suggested they were thinking the same thing.

Could this have anything to do with him dying on Kalendae?

Travis cut in. “His magic is visible now. Hellseher magic has always been invisible. What could that mean?”

“Is it just Darien’s?” Tamika asked.

The front door swung open, and everyone turned in its direction.

Loren couldn’t see who it was from here, but she recognized the voice of the former weapons technician immediately.

“I come bearing information.” Arthur’s statement echoed. It sounded like he was taking off his shoes. Next came the thuds of his socked feet hitting the floor as he hurried into the sitting room—

He stilled at the sight of the group gathered around the furniture. In his arms he carried two papers rolled up in long tubes.

“Join the party, Art,” Darien said, gesturing to the free spot next to Sabine and Logan. “Doctor Isley brought some information for us too.”

As soon as Arthur was seated, the group filled him in on everything Tamika had taught them, Jack staying quiet after being told a third time to button his lips.

And then Arthur leaned forward, unrolled a map of Angelthene, and spread it out across the coffee table. Ivy got up off the couch to

help, setting coasters on the corners of the map to keep them from curling up.

"It's funny," Arthur began, "that you would say Spirit Terra is blending with our world, because this here—" He pointed at a line he'd drawn diagonally across the city with a red pen. "—is where I've determined our city lines up with Spirit."

The others moved closer to see the map better, while being careful to leave Darien and Loren's view unobstructed.

Arthur explained, "I believe Angelthene is situated almost directly on top of the border between the Aether and the Void."

Loren's blood cooled at the mentioning of the Void—and the recent memory of the curtain she'd weakened. A wall protecting their world from the creatures living in there. The Shucca—and who knew what else.

"Hold on," Darien said. Arthur met his stare. "The Aether and the Void are two of the names Blue gave to the types of magic in those glass cylinders. They're places, too?"

Loren's brow furrowed. Exactly how much had she missed?

Arthur nodded. "Correct. Spirit Terra is divided into realms, and in these realms are magical wellsprings known as Astral Magic."

"Astral Magic?" Max and Travis murmured, voices tangling together.

"Let's use the Aether as an example, shall we?" Arthur said. He sat forward and cleared his throat, fingers interlocking between his knees. "It is a realm in Spirit Terra that houses the Astral Magic of the Aether—wind, thunder, lightning, and the such. Maybe more—who knows?"

"What about the Void?" Max asked.

"The Void is the worst of the worst."

Jack snickered. "Great."

Arthur continued, "It is the place of Blood Magic; Shadow Magic; Death Magic. And some things we have yet to understand, and might never understand." He paused, watery eyes drifting across the many faces in the room, lingering the longest on Darien. "Let's hope the Void never manages to merge with our world."

Tanner rubbed his chin in thought. "The fact that Angelthene is right on top of the Aether makes so much sense with all this rain we've been getting."

Doctor Atlas added, "And the cooler temperatures."

Loren tried to speak, tried to offer up the information bubbling inside her, but the spell stilled her tongue, her lungs shrivelling up from a lack of air.

She was getting really tired of this.

Arthur reached for another rolled-up paper that lay on the carpet near his feet. Cinder, Lace's Familiar, had found the paper and

claimed it as her own, sharp teeth biting the corners, fluffy tail twitching. She meowed in protest as Arthur extracted it from her claws.

"My apologies, Cinder," the man said. "I need to borrow this." He flattened it out and held it up for everyone to see.

"A color wheel?" Loren blurted.

"Right you are, Loren." He leaned forward and spread the wheel—printed on transparent paper—overtop the map of Angelthene. It was much bigger than Angelthene's map, only slivers of the violet and black sections falling over the city. "For those of you with minds that work better with visuals, I thought this would help."

"There's a section in Spirit Terra for every color?" Dallas asked. They were the first words Loren had heard the witch voice since they got here.

Dal's question had Max glancing his girlfriend's way.

There was definitely something going on between them.

"Spirit Terra is a mirror of our own world," Arthur explained. "For every place in our Terra, there exists one just like it in Spirit, though different and fuelled by Astral Magic." He jabbed the purple section with a wrinkled finger. "Aether." He moved onto the black. "Void." Purple-blue. "Aether," he said again. Next was royal blue. "Mist." One by one, he pointed at the colors, paper crackling as his index finger jabbed into it. The next one was green. "Terra Firma." Another jab of his finger on the red and orange sections. "Inferno." Then came yellow. "More Aether." Finally, he pointed at the white circle in the very centre of the color wheel. "The Eye."

"What's the Eye?" Darien asked.

"Illusion, mind control, animation," Arthur replied. "And a whole host of magics no one has ever come close to understanding."

Loren found herself unable to look away from it—the Eye.

Was that her magic? Her origin?

Arthur sat back against the couch and slapped his knees, looking quite proud of himself. The color wheel rolled back into a loose cylinder, the paper soon reclaimed by a swipe of Cinder's claws. "I expect a raise," Arthur said to Darien.

A low, quiet laugh slipped through Darien's lips. Loren clung to the sound, her heart having yearned to hear it again for days. Days that felt like years.

Tamika was staring at Tanner. "Why are you wearing glasses?"

Tanner, who was leaning against the wall near the media centre, shifted under her scrutiny. "I like them."

Darien encouraged, "Do you think they look good on him?"

Tamika gave Darien a knowing look. "This is Tanner, isn't it?"

Tanner looked very lost as he glanced between them, glasses

sliding down his nose. He pushed them back up. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Darien said quickly.

But Tamika rolled her eyes. "Your friend tried to set us up on a date."

"I certainly didn't," Darien said. Loren knew him well enough to tell he was lying.

Doctor Atlas laughed. "He could use one," she said of her son.

Tanner stared at Darien with a poker face. "Did you really?"

"I liked how your names sounded together," Darien said, smiling. "Tamika and Tanner. You also have very similar taste in eyeglasses."

Tanner rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the gods' sakes."

Tamika faced Tanner again. Looked him over. The attention caused him to shift on his feet again. "Can't you get a girl on your own?"

"I'm smart with computers, I'm not smart with girls."

Tanner barely got the last word out before Bandit leapt out of Darien's shadow with a series of sharp barks. The Familiar raced to the fridge, clawed feet tearing up the carpet. People shouted as Bandit bumped into legs and jostled the coffee table. He stepped on Cinder's tail, causing her to mew in pain, followed by his rubber chicken, the toy sucking in a noisy gasp as its belly was flattened.

The dog slammed into the fridge. The appliance rocked back.

Mortifer scrambled behind the cereal boxes, eyes wide with fear.

Loren moved aside as Darien shot to his feet. "Hey!" he snapped. He stalked across the room, feet pounding. "What the hell is going on, Bandit?"

Bandit was still barking. This time, when he spoke, he made his words audible for everyone in the room. *He's been stealing your coins!*

The Devils glanced at each other.

Travis said, "Is that where they've been going?"

Mortifer ducked behind a box of puffed rice.

Darien stepped up to the fridge and pushed that box aside, exposing the Hob to the many eyes in the room. Mortifer's knees were tucked under his chin, his hands flattened over his eyes. He spread his tiny fingers, peering through a space between two of them as the leader of the Seven Devils studied him.

"Morty," Darien reproached. "Is it true?"

*I'm not lying*, Bandit hissed. *The demon-monkey is a thief—*

"Bandit, that's enough," Darien said. "He has a name and it's not *demon-monkey*." He crossed his arms and looked up at Mortifer, who still peered between his fingers. "Where are they?" Darien asked.

Jack cut in. "Check the ice bin." Heads turned to look at him, Darien's included. Jack explained, "I put some ice in my drink the other night and found a coin in there."

Mortifer fully covered his eyes now as Darien swung open the

freezer door. Loren craned her neck to see better. Ice clacked as Darien sifted through the bin.

When he brought his fist back out, there were coins in it, metal edges poking between his fingers.

"Morty," he drawled, shaking his head. The Hob still wouldn't look at him. "Never again. Okay?"

The Hob fidgeted.

"I know you're worried about me," Darien said, his voice softening, "but I can't have you doing this. Okay?"

With reluctance, the Hob nodded.

"I need you to promise," Darien pressed.

The Hob took his hands off his eyes and used the right to draw a cross over his heart.

"Good. Here you go." Darien gave him some ice. He shut the freezer door and strode over to the island, his steps weaker than usual.

Tamika said, "He likes to eat ice?"

"He's an addict," Max replied.

"You know that's a sign of iron deficiency, right?"

Darien huffed a laugh. "He's a Hob." He grabbed a fresh dish towel and placed the cold coins on top.

And then he stood there, hands moving to grip the counter. He shut his eyes, nostrils flaring with a deep breath.

"Darien," Ivy said quietly. She was watching her brother with concern. Everyone else was watching him too, the whole room silent.

Loren's heart skipped a beat as he continued to stand there, those hands white with tension. Her own hands went to the couch cushions, squeezing them tight. "Are you okay?" she whispered, the question carrying through the soundless room.

"I'm beat," Darien said. He scrubbed a hand down his face. "And it's really bright in here."

The looks on several of the faces in the room showed exactly how concerning the statement was.

It wasn't bright in here at all. There were only a couple lamps on, all of them dim. Same with the light above the gas stove.

"Let's give him some space to rest," Ivy suggested.

"I can go upstairs," Darien slurred.

Doctor Atlas said, "You should stay put for the night, Darien. Unnecessary movement won't do your condition any good."

Everyone made their way out of the room, some of them leaving the house entirely, depending on the individual. Soon, it was just Loren and Darien left.

Darien returned to the couch, feet dragging. Bandit hopped up on one of the armchairs, turning in circles before lying down in a tight ball.

“Are you okay, Darien?” Loren whispered. He sat down beside her, the cushion sinking under his weight. “Can I get you anything?”

“Just you.” The slur of his words told her he was about to fall asleep. Another scrub of his hand down his face, and then he was lowering himself onto his back. “You’re all I need.”

She shifted out of the way so he could get comfortable. His hand went to her wrist and circled it, holding her in place, she realized. After a moment, his eyelids slid shut, and his breathing slowed.

“I love you, Darien,” Loren said into the quiet room. But he was already asleep, his breathing deep and quiet.

She watched him for a while, watched him breathe, making sure he was okay.

Because he was all she needed, too.



Max couldn't sleep.

The house was quiet, everyone except Loren and the other Devils gone. He tossed and turned in his bed, blankets rustling., sheets tangling around his limbs. He found himself reaching across the mattress every time he drifted off, the absence of the witch who should've been sleeping here tonight jolting him back into this horrid reality.

After about an hour, he couldn't resist any longer.

He sat up in the dark and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He knew he shouldn't do it, especially not after Dallas had left Hell's Gate, the both of them agreeing to spend at least one night apart before attempting to talk through their troubles again. But he did it anyway.

The Sight flooded his vision, black swallowing up his whites and irises, leaving him in a room flowing with colorful protective spells.

He remotely tracked Dallas, picturing her face in his mind. There was no need for a photograph; she was seared into his memory. He could never forget her.

She was down on the coast. Alone, by the looks of it. In the middle of the damn night.

Max pushed to his feet and got dressed.

---

The sopping dock groaned under Max's boots as he walked to the end of the long stretch, salty wind tearing through his hair and jacket.

It was dark and quiet, the beach of Tranquil Shore tucked away from Angelthene's noise and light pollution. A full moon hung above the ocean, tinting the foamy waves with silver. No more fog, but the evening was still cold. At least now they had an explanation for that.

What a strange night this had turned out to be. A strange few days, actually. Weeks. *Months* if you counted everything that happened before Kalendae. Max supposed this was their new normal.

A girl with red hair and white wings sat at the very end of the dock, knees tucked up to her chin, clumps of feathers fluttering on the wood around her.

Feathers she had clearly ripped out. There was no blood on the

dock, but there didn't need to be for Max to know it had caused her pain to tear them out. The wings were a part of her, hooked up to her nerve endings now that she was fully healed from her surgery.

"Nice night to get eaten by a demon," Max joked. His deep voice was nearly swallowed up by the lapping of waves against the dock.

Dallas didn't turn. "Good thing my Darkslayer bodyguard is here."

Max stopped several feet behind her. "How'd you know it was me?"

"I've heard your feet thumping through Hell's Gate for several months now. I can recognize your walk in my sleep."

"Sounds like I need to work on moving quieter."

Dallas wiped at her eyes. "I have a lot more to work on than you," she mumbled thickly. "Besides, I like hearing your footsteps. I find them comforting."

He walked closer, wood flexing underfoot. "Is that why you're not biting my head off for coming to find you?"

Dallas stared out at the dark horizon. "I was hoping you would come. I never wanted to leave Hell's Gate, I just...didn't know how to fix everything I've wrecked." She wiped at her eyes again with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "I still don't know."

Max sat down on the dock beside her. He swung his feet over the edge, the soles of his boots nearly grazing the choppy water.

He studied Dallas. She still wouldn't look at him, the silver rings around her pupils gleaming like the stars dusting the sky.

"I'm here now," he urged quietly. "So let's fix it."

"How?" she whispered.

"Well, for starters we can talk." He nudged her in the shoulder with his own. "Looking each other in the eyes always helps too."

Slowly, she turned her head until she was facing him.

"There," he praised, a small smile pulling at his mouth. "That's not so bad, is it?"

She huffed a laugh. "You're really nice to look at," she said.

Max smirked. "Likewise, Red. Maybe you should do it more often."

Dallas smiled, but the humor faded quickly. "I realize I haven't been the easiest person to be with. To be honest, I can't believe you haven't left me yet."

"Technically, I did," Max joked. "Remember?"

Dallas grimaced.

"Sorry," he said. "Go on."

She drew a deep breath, her manicured fingers fiddling with a rusted nail in the dock. "I made a mistake by getting on Blood Potions. I didn't see another way of getting everything done every week without dropping dead from exhaustion."

Max's past made him reluctant to voice his question, but he did

anyway. "Are you addicted?"

She kicked her feet out over the water and crossed her legs at the ankles. "I don't think so." She sighed, still kicking her feet as she stared out at the ocean. "Time will tell I guess." A pause. "I'll get off them. I'll try. I know you don't like them—"

"You need to do it for yourself too, Dallas. Not just me."

"I want to get off them," she insisted. "Honestly, I'm so sick of fighting for my dad's approval. My mom's too. Before you showed up tonight, Casen told me that if I wasn't careful I would kill myself trying to impress them." She sighed. "He's right. I just didn't want to admit it."

"I don't blame you for wanting to have a healthy relationship with your parents. I've wanted one with my dad ever since..." There was a lump in his throat. But he knew he should force out the words. Dallas was finally talking to him, and if he chose to shut her out, there was no reason why she shouldn't do the same to him. He concluded on a heavy breath, "Ever since Maya died and my dad left town."

Dallas glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Her lashes were still damp from the tears she'd cried. "He never tries to talk to you?"

Max shook his head. "Never." His dad was a good man. Max didn't blame him for not wanting anything to do with his Darkslayer son. "Maya's death wrecked my dad so thoroughly that he wanted nothing more than to start over and leave his past behind, which is exactly what he did."

"But he shouldn't have left you." Dallas's voice was a gentle whisper.

Max was quiet for several minutes. "I don't blame him," he said at last. "Sometimes it's easier to recover from grief if you give yourself a clean slate. Maybe one day I'll see him again." He swallowed. "But I won't force it."

When Dallas looked up at him, her freckles were pronounced by the moonlight that washed her face with silver. "I don't want to lose you, Max. I've never let myself get close to anyone before, I've been too afraid. But...but I want to try with you. Do you think we could start over?"

Max eyed her. She didn't look away or stiffen under the scrutiny. One point for Dallas. "Yeah, Red. I think we can start over." With a teasing smile, he extended a hand. "Maximus Reacher."

She took it. "Dallas Bright."

"How attached are you to your last name?"

Dallas snorted a laugh. "Not very."

"Cool." Max's smile grew. "Maybe changing it is in our future too."

When she smiled at him, she still didn't break eye contact. "Maybe."

He put an arm around her shoulder, drawing her closer. She leaned into him, her tattered wing curling around him.

For a long while, they sat there, their world small, consisting of nothing but each other and the briny water splashing the dock.

It might be small but it sure felt big to him.

—

Dallas spent the whole drive back to Hell's Gate leaning across the center console in the SUV, both of her hands gripping Max's, her head resting on his arm.

They were both broken in their own way. But hell, if he didn't love her. She might've said she hated him, but he knew from the way she was holding onto him that the words weren't true. Maybe she wasn't ready to express her feelings like he was, to say the three words he'd screamed at her by the river, but he would wait.

For her, he would wait as long as she needed.

Loren slept with Darien on the couch. All the lights in Hell's Gate were off, but there were a few enchanted candles burning on the coffee table, the rosy glow of the flames flickering against the walls.

Darien was lying on his back, Loren on top of him. Even in deep sleep, he did not let go of her, his strong arms cocooning her. And even though the path ahead of them, the path back to a normal life, felt horribly long and dark, she felt safe for the time being. This man was her love story, her future, the fulfilment of every wish her heart and mind had ever made. Until she'd met Darien, she had never believed in fate, but the way he made her feel, the way their paths had been so inexplicably entwined, had turned her into a believer.

But there was one catch to having everything you ever wanted. Once you had it, that meant you could lose it, and she would die fighting to keep this, to keep *him*, forever.

Tonight, she was hitting the pause button on everything. Darien needed her right here, right now, just like this. And she needed him too, perhaps even more than she'd realized.

So they stayed together on that couch all night, neither of them stirring. They held onto each other, not letting go. Not once.

—

Loren woke up shortly past six a.m. in the exact same spot on the couch.

Being careful not to wake Darien, she slowly turned her head to check on him.

He was breathing fine, his pulse that slow, steady beat that told her he was in a very deep sleep. His expression was peaceful. Innocent. Sometimes, she still found herself surprised by the sight of him dreaming like this. For someone so dangerous, he sure looked like an angel when he slept, no sign of the demons that haunted him while he was awake, no sign of the violence he turned to for help whenever he couldn't shake those demons.

She was glad to see it. He spent too many nights lying awake from bad dreams, or even simply from the fear of having bad dreams. This was exactly the kind of rest he deserved. His face had mostly healed

too, only a few shallow cuts and faded bruises to show for his fall.

For several minutes, she stayed where she was, listening to the morning doves cooing among the branches of palm trees outside, reveling in the feel of the Darkslayer's warm, solid body under her own. The clock in the kitchen ticked, the area saturated with the fragrance of freshly brewed espresso and the honeyed croissants Tanner and Ivy fought over.

Slowly, carefully, Loren wiggled out of his grasp and stood, her low blood sugar making the room spin. As soon as the dizzy spell passed, she tiptoed to the fridge, where Mortifer was just waking up in his castle of cereal boxes.

He propped himself up on an elbow, tired red eyes blinking down at her. The black flames on his head were suffused with the deep amber glow of the rising sun streaming in through the curtains.

Loren grabbed the whiteboard and a marker off the fridge. *Can Darien go with me through the tree portal?* she wrote.

Mortifer shook his head.

*Crap.* Loren wiped the board clean with the side of her hand and wrote a new message. *Why not?*

Mortifer sat up, kicked his feet out in front of him, and motioned for her to pass him the board and marker. The squeak that always accompanied his writing made her glance over her shoulder at Darien, but he didn't stir. His breathing remained quiet, his face untroubled.

Finally, Mortifer showed her his reply. *Too strong,* he'd written. *Only you can get in.*

Loren thought it through. And then she took the board and asked the Hob one last question. *What about a bruise where something has already come through? Like a monster?* Her hand stilled every time she nearly tripped the spell, but luckily Mortifer got her point.

He nodded and wrote two words. *That'll work.*

She quietly thanked him, scrubbed the board clean, and got ready for school. By the time she was showered and dressed in jeans and a shirt, she found Tanner lying on the couch in the library, bobbing his head to a song he was listening to through headphones. In the sunroom, she heard the clink of a paintbrush swirling through a can of water. Lace was awake too. Painting to help with her own anxieties.

When Tanner spotted her, he pulled the headphones off and hooked them around his neck. "Morning." His stare held a question—lots of questions. Maybe some accusations too.

"Good morning," Loren said. "Can you drive me to school, please?"

The way Tanner's eyes flicked toward the sitting room told her where his thoughts had gone. "You don't want to wait for Darien to wake up?"

"I'm going to be late, and I still need time to get changed into my

uniform. Besides, I don't want to disturb him. He clearly needs rest."

Tanner was frowning. "Look, I don't like to meddle, but...he really loves you, Loren. He just got you back, and he's going to wake up to find that you're gone again—"

"Tanner, I know," she interrupted softly. "I get it. And I'm going to talk to him, but this is what I need you to do for me." She sat down on the arm of the couch. When she spoke again, she took care to keep her voice down, overly aware of the many sharp ears in this house. "When he wakes up, I need you to tell him to come to my school. He can't text or call me, okay? He needs to come *into* the school and find me."

Tanner looked very, very alarmed. "Should I be concerned?"

"Not if you do as I ask."

His eyes narrowed with scrutiny. "Are you in trouble?"

"No more questions." She stood. "Please, Tanner, take me to school and tell Darien to find me later when he's feeling better."

Tanner rose to his feet. "This is slightly better than the fireplace incident, but barely." He made for the entrance hall, beckoning with a pale hand. "Let's go, then. Before I change my mind."

---

Darien was still shaking off the remnants of sleep as he paced through the empty sitting room of Hell's Gate. Someone had turned on a couple lamps, the backyard dark under a starless sky.

"Where's Loren?" Darien said to no one as he made for the staircase, wondering how much of last night—the carnival, the group discussion in the sitting room, the feel of Loren's delicate arms hugging his body while he slept—was a dream and how much was real. Had Loren been here at all? Or had his desperate mind given him what he'd been pining for? "What day is it?" His voice echoed. "How long have I been out?"

That was when Tanner came down the stairs, socked feet thumping, the glasses that were perched on his head nearly falling off. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Where's Loren?" Darien's heart was racing. There was a sick feeling in his stomach, one that told him a cold truth he didn't want to acknowledge. But he bit out, "She's gone again, isn't she?"

"She left this morning," Tanner said, slowing as he reached the bottom of the staircase. "You've been out since last night."

Darien ran a hand through his hair, lungs tight, mind spinning with everything Tamika and Arthur had said, all of it flooding back to him in pieces. Spirit Terra, the Veil, the Crossroads—

"She's in trouble," Darien said, hand squeezing a fistful of his hair, nearly ripping it out. He forced his hand to let go. "I know she's

connected in some way to all that shit going on with Spirit Terra. I need to talk to her.” He’d suspected it for some time now, especially after that warlock at the Chopping Block had revealed the information about the lowering of the Veils. He hadn’t wanted to admit it, but—

“Look, Darien,” Tanner began. “I don’t know what’s going on, but she asked me to tell you to go to her school. She wouldn’t tell me why, but she said you can’t call or text her.”

Darien spun toward the front door, but Tanner hurried past him and blocked his path.

“Darien,” Tanner said, moving in Darien’s way again when he tried to side-step him. “Give it an hour. It’s suppertime, she’ll be in the dining hall. You’ll be seen.”

“Shit.” He started pacing again. His clothes smelled of blood and sweat; he needed to have a shower. “Did she say anything else? Anything at all? I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“No, but I decided to dig into the student files at AA, and I found that Klay kid.”

Darien froze. “And?”

“He was registered under a fake name.” Every thought eddied out of Darien’s head as Tanner concluded, “His real last name is Lucent.”



Loren stayed in the library of Angelthene Academy way past curfew, the other students having retired to their dorms hours ago.

She was beginning to worry about Darien and the others. But she wouldn't risk texting any of them, in case the imperator was still monitoring her phone. Klay had watched her during all her classes again, always sitting in the back row. He'd watched her during lunch hour and every snack break, never giving her a chance to breathe, the imperator's men doing the same.

If Darien didn't make it here tonight, if she didn't get a chance to show him what was happening, she worried Quinton would have her back in Spirit again to finish what he'd started. And this time, she wasn't sure she would make it back out again. Once he found the Well, or—worse—discovered she was playing him for a fool, he would kill her.

The sound of the security guards approaching the library pushed her up out of her seat. She was at one of the back tables in the long room, the many rows of book shelves blocking her from view, the broken ones repaired by the careful magic of the headmaster and the other teachers.

The guards were coming in here.

Quickly, she grabbed her bags and rushed behind the shelves, barely avoiding getting spotted. It sounded like they were going to check the whole library, which meant she would have to get through the only set of doors at the far end of the room and out into the corridor.

She moved stealthily, impressing even herself as she dodged the beams of flashlights and crouched behind book cases.

But when she made it to the doors, the ghost—the Staring Teenager—threw a book at her head with a hissing laugh, eyes no more than black sockets.

She ducked right on time—but there was one problem.

The book hit the wall beside the door instead, drawing the attention of both guards, who shouted out upon spotting her, telling her to stop.

Loren made a run for it, book bag and purse thumping against her hip. She took the twisting corridors quickly, footsteps slapping, skirt and hair fluttering. They were coming after her; she could hear them.

If they caught her, if they found out which student was wandering the hallways this late, she could be suspended. Or, worse, expelled. She had to hide.

As soon as she made it around the next corner, she sprinted to the closest classroom door, swung it open, and hurried inside. She shut it, hand fumbling in search of the lock.

There was none.

“Are you *kidding* me?” she hissed.

With gasping breaths, she held very still, listening for the voices of the guards. Their footsteps were quiet, as if they were moving carefully in effort to sneak up on her.

A moment later, one of them spoke. “Where did she go?”

“I didn’t see,” another replied.

A flashlight lit up the crack under the door.

Loren backed up farther into the dark room. Back, back, back, she moved, her polished shoes soundless on the linoleum, moonbeams trickling through the windows behind her.

The security guards finally moved on, the light disappearing.

But her heart still raced. She needed a minute to catch her breath, to find the courage to leave this room and figure out how to get back to the House of Salt without being seen.

She backed up two more paces—

And stumbled into something solid. A rough hand clamped down on her mouth, silencing the scream that rose in her throat, while another arm with a strength that was staggering wound around her middle, keeping her from running.

“You’re coming with me,” a male voice whispered in her ear. A voice that was deep and richer than caramel. Suddenly, she was not afraid, and when her heart beat faster, it was for an entirely new reason as the man went on to say, “You’re not going to fight me, and you’re not going to make any indication that you are being taken against your will. Do we have an understanding?” That hand loosened, taking with it the warmth that had spread through her lips.

Loren turned her head to look up at the Darkslayer looming over her, his mouth close to hers. So close, they were sharing each other’s air.

“I feel like I’ve heard that before,” she said. Her tone was teasing, and her heart was leaping with joy. It felt like a small sun was glowing inside her, answering the light glowing in Darien, the magnets of their auras rejoicing at being close once again.

The sound of the security guards approaching the door as they came back this way had Darien’s arm tightening around her waist, his other hand returning to grip her mouth.

He pulled her up against the wall by the door, bumping the book

shelf so hard that several dusty tomes nearly fell off. Flattening himself against it, he held onto her tight, her back pressed up against his front.

Together, they waited, holding their breath. Seconds dragged by as they listened for sounds that might indicate the guards had moved along.

With no lock on the door, all it would take was one turn of the handle and they would be done for. *She* would be done for. Banned from attending Angelthene Academy. The men were talking loudly, lingering just on the other side of the door, their conversation unending.

Finally, those voices faded away as they continued their rounds.

With her body pinned against Darien's, she could feel every muscle of his impressive physique, every dip and curve. Could feel the heat coming off him. Could scent that delicious cologne.

And she might've been guilty of pressing her ass back into his groin.

He stiffened, the hand on her mouth tightening. They could still hear the security guards, though their voices were slowly fading with distance, thank the Star.

Loren stopped caring about them as Darien dragged his free hand down the valley between her breasts, his thumb snagging on the buttons in her white blouse. Her nipples hardened, and a pulsing warmth spread between her thighs as that hand traveled lower...and lower...

Loren knew Darien felt her breathing hitch under his palm, felt her stomach flutter as his other hand traveled over it. An electric current spread between her body and his, a tornado of butterflies stirring deep inside her. He eased the straps of her bags off her shoulder and lightly dropped them to the floor.

When she tilted her hips, she felt that he was hard as a rock against her backside. The feel of him had her mouth drying out, while another part of her became so wet she could hardly take it.

She grinded up against him, causing the hand over her mouth to tense, the other fisting her skirt.

*He* couldn't take it anymore either.

The hand that was fisting her skirt was suddenly underneath it, yanking her panties down so hard she heard the stitching split.

Eyes wide, she twisted her head, but she could barely move beneath his grip. She tried to say his name—

“Shh.” Darien nipped at her earlobe, his breath caressing her skin. He pulled her panties down farther, lace scraping her thighs. “Do you want them to hear us and ruin our fun?”

Indeed, the security guards weren't far. It sounded like they were

only halfway down the hallway now, hopefully carrying onto another part of the academy.

Good riddance. She wanted to get fucked. Wanted to be as close to Darien as she could get.

That hand of his was creeping toward the space between her thighs, testing, she realized, to see if she wanted this.

He paused. Eyes that were grayer in the moonlit room than they were blue met her own, the heated look in them softening at whatever emotions he saw on her face. Darien's right hand freed up her mouth as the other moved farther inward, teasing the area with a touch that lit her whole body on fire.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Hi," she whispered back.

The smile on his face grew, that adorable dimple showing. "How are you?" he asked with a playful tone, that damned hand that was under her skirt drifting closer, but not close enough, his thumb tracing the inside of her thigh. The friction drove her wild.

"Better." Her voice was breathy. "Now that you're here."

"I've always been here." There was an edge in his tone. Not an edge of frustration, but an edge of lust. Darien's voice was a low rumble as he added, "You've just been avoiding me." Those eyes became slightly guarded, as if he feared she would disappear again the moment they finished what they'd started, right here against this bookshelf.

"I need to talk to you," she said, though her hips were rotating, her traitorous body telling her that talking was the last thing they should do.

"We'll talk after."

"After what?" she teased, her gaze flicking to the sinful curve of his mouth. "I think I need you to show me."

Amusement danced in his eyes, a striking combination of lust, love, and humor. "I think I need you to tell me," he countered.

She rose up on her toes and kissed him, her teeth latching gently onto his bottom lip. "Touch me," she whispered. "Please."

So he did.

His rough fingers slid up the center of her, feeling how wet she was for him. That first contact nearly made her groan. Her heart was beating wildly, head spinning, lungs threatening to burst.

"Would you look at that?" That deep voice electrified every nerve ending in her body and made her squirm, her thighs trapping his hand between them. "I'd say someone missed me."

Grabbing her by the chin with his other hand, he kissed her roughly on the mouth, teeth and tongues clashing...

And pushed a finger deep inside her.

A whimper crawled up her throat. He swallowed it down as if it were his favorite wine.

When he broke the kiss, he stayed close enough that his mouth was still brushing hers, so close she could feel every word he spoke more than she could hear them. "Think you can stay quiet?"

She shook her head, bucking when he added another finger.

Darien gave a dark laugh. He blinked heavily, and when he opened his eyes again, they were black like ink. Loren felt the sound barrier swirling around them, and she was grateful for it, because Darien began pumping harder. She gave a breathy moan as she became putty in his hands, her whole bodyweight supported by his strong arms.

"Fuck, I've missed you." His thumb knuckle rubbed her clit while his other fingers worked inside her. "I've missed you so much." He jerked his chin at her blouse. "Undo your shirt."

She did as she was told, loving the way he watched her unfasten every button. The closer she got to the bottom, the harder her fingers shook, her whole body dissolving under his touch as he coaxed her closer to climax, her legs shaking too.

"So gorgeous," he breathed, that hand never missing a beat as he edged around her orgasm, building it up until she would explode, just like he always did. With her shirt now hanging open, he drank in the slope of her breasts, the shiver that spread across her creamy skin from her arousal, her hard nipples peaking through her bra. "You're so fucking gorgeous." That hand sped up without warning, carrying her to her release. She could feel it building and building. Her breathing hitched, her heart sprinting fast enough to make her head spin. She wanted release so badly, and he gave it to her—he gave it to her hard.

With a crooking of his fingers, he hit that golden spot deep inside her, sending her into a staggering orgasm.

Pleasure barreled down her spine, the feeling so intense that she cried out his name.

He swallowed it with a kiss, claiming the sound—claiming every part of her. His tongue was in her mouth, and she loved the way he tasted. With a handful of deft movements, he undid his belt, and she felt his cock press up against her ass.

"Give it to me," she panted against his mouth. "I want you."

A wicked grin spread across his face. "I know."

"Bully."

"Spoiled brat." His eyes were black again. She recognized that look on his face—the exhaustion lining his features, the tension in his jaw.

She reached up to touch the sharp angle of his cheekbone. "You're having a Surge," she whispered.

"I'll be careful," he said, breathless. There was a hint of hesitation in his words, but it was overshadowed by his need. "I promise."

"You say that as if you've done something wrong."

"I'll always be careful with you," he said. "I take care of everything I love." He positioned himself at her entrance, lifting up her thigh to open her up. "And it's you that I love."

He pushed himself inside of her with one swift movement, the sudden intrusion causing her to gasp aloud.

"You like that?" he breathed.

"Yes." Her voice sounded as desperate as she felt.

"Good girl." He started fucking her. Hard. Hands gripping her hips, fingertips digging in. She pushed back against him with every thrust, deepening each of his movements. Every movement was so forceful she felt him in her stomach.

Again and again and again, they met each other, the skin of her ass slapping against his thighs. It was so good. She'd wanted this for what felt like so long, she could hardly take it. She wanted more. Wanted him to fuck her until she couldn't walk.

"Hold on," Darien said, breathing heavily. "I want to see you."

He pulled out of her, leaving her cold with his absence, and positioned her so that her back was against the shelf. He grabbed her around the backs of her thighs and hefted her up, sheathing himself inside her at the same time, making her gasp again. Gasp, and moan. She would never get over that feeling, would never get over him.

"This is so bad," she whispered, crying out as he thrust deep, filling her up until she swore she would burst.

"You know you like it," he crooned. "Don't you?"

"No," she lied.

Darien saw through it. "You really are a little brat," he growled, picking up speed, going deeper than ever with every thrust, not slowing, not lessening. And she was glad for it. She didn't want gentle sex; she wanted hard fucking, wanted to claw at him until their souls were tangled together as one, and she could tell that he wanted it too. A book fell off the shelf, and he swatted it away in midair before it could hit her on the head. "Did you miss me?"

The truth bubbled to the tip of her tongue, but she decided to lie instead. Baiting him, knowing he would only give her more for it. His punishments were also her reward. "No," she squeezed out.

"Liar." The word was a soft snarl. He lowered his mouth to the space between her neck and shoulder. She shivered when she felt his teeth graze her skin. "And you know I don't like that word." He planted a kiss on that sensitive spot, sucking on her skin, turning it red. "Did you think about me when you touched yourself?" His nose brushed along her neck as he kissed the hollow at the base of her throat. "When you fucked yourself like the naughty little brat that you are?"

“No.” But she had. When she was in her dorm room alone one night, she’d thought of him. He was all she thought about, even long before they’d started dating and she had spent her weekends just down the hallway from him. On one of those nights, she had dared to give herself release under his roof, but she had worried the whole time that he might catch her touching herself to the thought of him. But it had also been a fantasy of hers, a filthy fantasy that he would spot her through the walls with his Sight. He would come into her suite, take her hand out from between her legs, pin her down on the bed...and fuck her breathless.

“You’re a liar,” Darien growled, deepening his thrusts to the point of pain. A pain so good, it made her body shudder, her insides quivering with every blow. “What do you want, Loren? Tell me.”

“You,” she gasped. “You’re all I’ll ever want.”

“Thank fuck.” And then he was fucking her faster, books thumping and knocking together with every thrust.

The minutes sped by as they fucked each other, neither of them holding back. The kissing was soon turning into biting, teeth nearly drawing blood. Her hands were up his shirt, nails clawing his back, her legs squeezing his waist. She never wanted this to be over, never wanted to be separated from him again.

“I can feel your pussy clenching,” he said, his breath coasting across her mouth, her lips raw and rosy from all the kissing. “You going to come for me, sweetheart?” His movements sped up, and she groaned. “Come on, baby—” He thrust hard. Again. And again. And again. “I want to fucking feel it—”

Release found her, so intense she nearly blacked out. Darien kissed her hard as he pumped inside her, again and again, drawing out her orgasm until she could hardly breathe.

“Perfect,” he growled, watching her with a gaze that devoured. When he bent his head to kiss her neck, he whispered against her skin, so quietly she could hardly hear the words, “I want you so badly, Loren.”

“You have me,” she gasped, confused.

He shook his head, the silken ends of his hair sweeping across her collarbone. “I don’t just want you right now, I want you forever.” He thrust deep, squeezing the air out of her lungs in a high cry. “I want you to stop running from me. Whatever’s going on, I need you to tell me. Because it’s you and me. You and me forever.” Another thrust, this one even deeper. He was holding her close, her breasts crushing against his chest, but it still wasn’t close enough. “Until you tell me to go away.”

“I won’t ever tell you to go away.”

“Then tell me that you love me. Do you love me?”

“Of course I do.” She would always love him; there was no question about that. He was her today, her tomorrow, her forever.

“Then say it.”

“I love you.”

His movements sped up. The shelf dug into her back as he fucked her hard, every movement brutal. Another orgasm crested, intense pleasure mingling with pain.

And then he found his own release, coming deep inside her as he thrust into her one last time, his body shuddering against hers.

For a long time, he looked into her eyes, and she looked into his, neither of them talking, yet it felt like they were saying everything.

“I love you,” she said again, brushing the hair back from his face. She pressed a kiss between his brows. “I’ve never stopped loving you, and I never will. You are perfect for me, Darien. And I always think about you, all the time. Even before we started dating, you were all I thought about.”

Despite the echo of sorrow in his eyes, a smile curved his alluring mouth. “Sounds like someone had a crush.”

“You have no idea,” she said around a huff of laughter. “I was crushing hard.”

“Will you tell me what’s going on?” he whispered. “Please?”

There was a commotion out in the hallway.

The guards were coming back.

Darien swore under his breath. Quickly, he set her down. Loren hurried to pull up her underwear, fingers trembling as she fastened the buttons on her shirt. Darien was finished with himself in no time, his pants back up, belt back in place. He helped her do up the last button on her blouse, his movements quicker than hers.

As soon as he was done, she grabbed her bags and took his hand, tugging him across the room, toward the door at the other end.

A book fell off the shelf. It hit the floor with a thud, pages creasing. Loren stared at Darien with wide, terrified eyes.

Darien stared back.

The footsteps in the hallway picked up speed.

Loren’s eyes flashed to the door on the other side of the room—the one that connected this classroom to the next. This hallway was made up of a network of classrooms, and that door was their only other way out.

“Let’s play a game,” she whispered.

“What?” Darien mouthed.

“I want you to catch me.”

“Loren,” Darien hissed, looking over his shoulder at the sound of the approaching guards.

Loren took off running.



She hurtled through the door that led to the next classroom just as the guards were bursting through the one behind them, shouting out for them to stop.

Darien was right behind her, the pounding of his footfall mixing with hers and the guards'. She pushed herself as fast as she could, but she was already winded from their fun against the bookshelf, and her legs were wobbling like jelly. But she ran, barely a foot ahead of Darien. She hoped it would be enough.

When they reached the third room, she stopped taking the doorways that connected to classrooms and instead pivoted to the left, flying out into the dark corridor that would take her back to the library, door slamming against the wall.

She dared a glance over her shoulder. Darien was still right behind her, looking confused but not doubting her, his footsteps never faltering.

When she spotted the corner that would lead to the library, she plunged her hand into her bag, digging around until her fingers closed on the two syringes.

Darien said her name, but she refused to slow or turn as she emptied the needle into her neck, concealing her actions from Darien with her hair. She dropped it back into her bag, and with a flick of her fingers, she took the cap off the other.

She skidded around the corner and flew through the open doors of the library, hurtling past the Staring Teenager, heading straight for that patch of colder air about halfway across the room. She couldn't see it, but she could sense it. It was only feet away now.

Just as she reached it, she screeched to a stop and spun around.

Darien was still running. The momentum behind his steps sent him crashing into her before he could slow.

She stuck the needle in his neck.

*"What the fuck!"* he barked.

But they were already through the Veil, leaving the guards and the academy behind, their bodies dissolving into colorful sparks.

—

Darien landed on top of Loren in an explosion of purple dust that choked their surroundings. But he paid no attention to those, because he had crushed the air out of her lungs with his fucking weight.

Panic gripped his heart in a fist as he pushed himself up onto his elbows and carefully took Loren's head in his hands.

"Loren," he said, voice echoing far and wide. It sounded metallic in here, as if he were talking into a silver bell. "Are you hurt? I'm so sorry. Tell me what hurts."

But she was breathing fine, and she was taking *his* face into *her* hands then. "Darien, I'm okay," she said softly. "I'm fine. *Look.*" Gently, she turned his head to the left...

Darien was too stunned to speak.

Violet land with a black sky stretched all the way around them, that sky lit up with bolts of lilac lightning. A full moon hung above them, bathing everything with its spectral glow. Mountains peaked way off in the distance, jagged and capped with white. The only vegetation in the area were shrubs and trees that resembled evergreens, but they were stark as silhouettes and just as black.

He forced himself to blink. Several times, just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. And then he looked down at Loren, who was still holding onto his face, her eyes heavy with relief.

"Spirit," Darien whispered, that same strange echo chasing the word, rippling all the way out to the foreign horizon. "This is Spirit Terra."

Loren lifted her chin, as if she were trying to nod. But she froze halfway and thumped her head against the ground, a quiet sob clawing up her throat.

Darien held her tighter, not understanding—*dying* to understand. "Baby, don't cry. Talk to me." But she only shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Why won't you talk to me, Loren?"

"Darien, I'm sorry," she managed to gasp. "I tried to tell—" She froze mid-sentence again, looking like she was choking—

Holy fuck. Suddenly, all those shadows crowding his mind were driven away by a light that was blinding, and Darien knew exactly what was going on.

He wiped the warm tears off her rosy cheeks. "Shh, it's okay. It's okay. You can't tell me, can you?" His thumb brushed across the glowing numbers on her neck—the same ones he could feel ticking away in his own. "What is this?" he asked.

"A Life Clock." That, she could answer. She lifted her head off the ground, hair coated with purple dust. "We have to get out of here."

He stood and helped her up, and then he drew her into his arms, holding her tight. "I need you to do something for me."

When she replied, her face was still buried against his chest. She clung to him, as if she'd feared she would never get to again. "Anything." The word was a sob.

"I need you to turn off your phone," he said. She peeked up at him. "I need you to turn it off until I'm out of the school. And tomorrow, you're going to meet me at the gates at three. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

"And before you come to the gates, I need you to shut off your phone again. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded again, one last tear slipping down her cheek as her sorrow was replaced with hope and understanding.

“Are you going to show me how we can get out of here, Lola?”

She gestured to the area they’d fallen through. The air undulated faintly, like a mirage shimmering in a desert, its temperature cooler than the rest. “Bruised,” she said.

“A bruise in the Veil,” Darien prompted. She managed a half-nod before whatever was keeping her from speaking halted the movement.

That explained where the creature in the library had come from. It seemed Tamika and Arthur were right—about everything.

This place—it looked just like the violet section on the color wheel. *The Aether*, Arthur had called it.

Loren took his hand, lacing her fingers with his. Together, they stepped through the Veil, their bodies melting into sparks of color.

A moment passed before they were back in the school. Darien could hear the security guards still making their rounds.

He took his phone out and shut it off, gesturing for Loren to do the same. She did so without delay, her fingers faintly trembling.

Darien took her into his arms for one last hug, fingers curling in her soft hair. “Gates at three p.m. tomorrow,” he whispered, breathing in the scent of her. Cedar smoke, honeysuckle, and peaches. That cedar smoke came from the Arcanum Well—he knew that now. “Do not leave the school until then. And don’t message me unless you’re in trouble.”

And then he left, looking over his shoulder as he went.

They both watched each other until they couldn’t anymore.

—

Ebonfield was always quiet, no matter the time of day. The district was located in the south-eastern side of Angelthene, where only the foolish and the daring wandered. It offered very little to see, aside from the stone wishing fountain that sat in the middle of a patch of flat land. The weathered rock was speckled with rain and mud, and there were smears of old blood on its surface, evidence of all the people who’d paid a visit over the centuries, some of them never coming back out again.

Dry grass crunched underfoot as Darien walked over to the fountain, leaving his car parked by two converging dirt roads. The place was as quiet as the last time he’d come here, the noise of the city smothered by a coating of magic beyond anyone’s comprehension. The Crossroads sometimes felt like they were trapped in time, constant and reliable and floating freely from the rest of the world. It all stemmed back to that old saying: betwixt and between.

When he reached the fountain, he circled it, stopping near the place where the bucket sat. There were rings of rust scattered across the stone, a result of how long the bucket had sat here.

He took a knife out of his pocket, snapped it open, and cut a line diagonally across his palm. He held that hand over the corroded bucket and squeezed his fingers into a fist.

Blood slid through his grip. It dripped into the pail, plinking against the hole-speckled bottom.

He jumped into a crouch on the stone ledge. With one swift punch, he sent the bucket into the dark depths...and waited.

Writhing shadows and curling mist swept in, carrying him into the spider's habitat. When the mist dissipated, as quickly as it had come, he found himself in a dark and windowless room, the Widow watching from her usual resting place on the other side of the fountain. The place was cold and reeked of oil and sewer gas, the only light in the area coming from something he never could pinpoint.

"Darien Cassel," the spider crooned. When she shifted her long legs, the light that didn't have a source outlined the fine hairs covering her body. "What a pleasant surprise. I knew it was you the minute I tasted your blood. The absence of color, yet the sum of all, seen very seldom throughout history. A truly delicious treat. Truly delicious."

"I feel like I should say thank you, but I'm going to skip that part. I'm in a hurry."

"Then make your request."

Asking a creature of the Crossroads a question always came with a hefty price. So, instead of asking the Widow a question, Darien planned on making an assumption—a move that would guarantee only one cost instead of two.

"I want to buy back Loren Calla's freedom of speech. I want the spell—or whatever it is that is stopping her from speaking—lifted."

The Widow blinked her many eyes. The atmosphere of the room shifted in a way that suggested she found his move to be bold and impressive. "I must say, this is a far easier request than your last."

"What will it cost me?"

"I would like a taste." That almost seemed too simple. Too cheap.

But Darien raised the blade to the clotted wound in his palm—

"Not blood," the Widow said. "Though I meant what I said: it is a truly delicious treat. Instead, I would like to taste your aura. It shall give me a far stronger flavor than what your blood can provide."

Darien considered her request. She waited with remarkable patience, not blinking or moving.

He lowered the knife. "You must promise not to take any part of it," he said, his firm words echoing.

"I said taste, bounty hunter. I did not say take."

"Go ahead."

Darien watched as the spider closed her eyes. The waters of the fountain churned, and Darien felt compelled to look inside.

The contents reminded him of space, what looked like planets and stars spinning within. As the spider tasted his aura, he began to feel weightless, stretched thin, and picked at, as if his soul was being plucked like a harp string. It disconcerted him, and he was about to tell the Widow to stop when the feeling disappeared, leaving him exactly the same as before, not a part of him missing.

Slowly, she opened her many eyes. "Very seldom." The spider's words slithered over the dank walls. "Yes, very seldom seen."

"You can keep that information to yourself," Darien said tightly. "I don't want to know how dark and corrupted my aura is, thanks."

The spider merely watched him. There was a peculiar shift to the air, one that Darien couldn't read, but she didn't reveal her thoughts by speaking them aloud.

Darien prompted, "Your turn."

The contents of the fountain started to churn again. "I am intrigued by your love for her," the Widow said. "It is pure and it runs deep. I cannot say I expected such a thing from someone like you."

"That seems like a backwards compliment, but I'll take it."

"Reach into the fountain, Darkslayer."

Darien rolled back his sleeve and dipped his hand into the fountain, the cold temperature biting bone-deep. His fingers closed around a glass vial sealed with a wooden cork, the liquid inside clear as pure water.

"Make her drink it," the Widow said, "and her tongue will be freed. But you mustn't tell her what you are doing until after she has consumed it. Every drop, slayer. Every last one."

Darien tipped the vial, watching the liquid slide within. "Will the person who placed the spell on her know when it's been broken?"

"I cannot tell. You must take the potion and go. Protect the girl at all costs. Protect her with your life." Darien planned to. "She mustn't die."

He tucked the vial into the inside pocket of his jacket and zipped it shut. "You care for her," he said. "You didn't ask her for her magic that day she came to bargain with you. She had more than enough to trade for her dog's life, but you didn't ask her to give it to you."

"You give me far too much credit, Darien Cassel. While I may have a soft spot for the human girl, I could not have asked for her magic. When a person comes to me to trade, they must know and understand exactly what they are trading. She did not even know she had magic."

Darien took the knife and cut his palm back open, pain splitting

through his hand. "You beings are complicated."

"Anything that has been around for as long as we have is complicated."

He squeezed his hand into a fist, blood sliding through his tight grip, droplets splashing like rain as it hit the surface of the sludge in the fountain. The sound echoed countless times, the many ripples of the water reflecting on the walls in a hypnotic pattern. "Thank you," he said.

"Something wicked is coming." Mist began to sweep in. A chill prickled across the back of Darien's neck. The Widow wasn't looking at him; she was looking beyond. "I can feel it pushing at the Crossroads."

"What is it?" Darien's voice hollowed out as the mist and shadows began to carry him away. "What's coming?"

"I cannot say." The spider's voice was distant now, and Darien was entirely blind, stuck in the in-between. "But I will be seeing you again."

Darien couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not, but he was back in Ebonfield before he could ask the Widow anything else.

It was a miracle when Loren got through a whole school day without having Klay there. For the first time since this mess started, there was no shadow watching her in every class, no predator stalking her in the hallways. She had no idea why he was absent, but she didn't care. As soon as three o'clock rolled around, she would be walking out those gates to meet with Darien. She hoped Klay would still be gone by that time, along with the imperator's other men, not a single one of them here either.

As the hours passed, she kept an eye out for anyone who watched her a little too closely in the academy, but she noticed nothing unusual. It was the most freedom she'd had in what felt like a lifetime, but it almost seemed too good to be true.

By the time three o'clock rolled around, she found herself breathing hard, sweat beading on her back as she hurried through the academy.

The front doors seemed so far away, the staircase endless, the students a sea she had to push through. When she made it across the foyer, she squished through the front doors that were being opened by other students and hurried across the lawn.

As she walked, breath fogging before her in the chilly, rainy day, her eyes scanned the parking lot just up the hill. There was no sign of Darien's car or truck, but there was a sedan parked in his usual spot.

It was Arthur's car. Darien must have borrowed it to keep anyone who might be watching from seeing her leave the school with him.

The sight of it barely eased the tightness in her chest. She would feel better the moment she saw that Darien was okay, that nothing bad had happened to him while she was stuck in class.

The gates swung open with a squeak. There were too many cars to look at, too many faces passing by on the sidewalk. What if they were being watched? What if the imperator knew?

Loren got in the car and hurried to close the door, her breathing rapid, palms slick with sweat.

Darien didn't say a word. As he peeled away from the school, driving the car faster than it had likely ever moved, Loren fidgeted in her seat, fumbling with her tongue again. "Where are we going?" she whispered.

It took him a long time to answer. "I trusted you last night," he

said at last. He reached across the car and took her hand out from between her thighs. He laced his fingers with hers, his hand practically swallowing her own. "Now it's your turn to trust me."

She did trust him. She always would.

Darien brought her to Hell's Gate. Instead of parking out front, he drove into the garage. Hiding her, she realized. So that no one outside of these walls could see her.

He cut the engine. The garage doors rolled shut. The lights flickered on with the sensor, bathing the massive room and the many cars and motorcycles lined up inside with bright light.

Darien got out and came around to her side. He opened her door and unbuckled her seatbelt.

"I can do that myself, you know," she said teasingly.

The corner of his mouth tipped up with a smile. "I'm perfectly capable as well." He took her hands, interlocking his warm fingers with hers, and helped her out.

As they made their way across the room, Darien studied her closely. Really closely. "Are you cold? You're shivering."

"I'm scared," she whispered. She didn't want to admit it. It made her feel like a coward, but she was downright terrified. It was by chance that she had made it this far without getting caught, without causing any of her family or friends to get hurt, and she feared her luck was running out.

"Of what?" Darien asked.

"I'm scared that I'm losing you." Her breath hitched in her throat, her worst fear hanging naked in the air between them.

"You're never going to lose me, Loren. You found me." He lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed the pulse in her wrist. "Just don't run from me again. Promise?"

She *had* run from him. Twice now. Once when she'd walked in on him collecting, and then again last night, when she'd brought him into Spirit Terra.

She still hated herself for the first one.

"I promise," Loren said, holding up her free pinky.

A smile played on his mouth. He linked his small finger with hers, curling tight.

The other Devils were waiting for them in the kitchen. Jack, Ivy, and Tanner were seated at the barstools at the island. Max, Lace, and Travis stood nearby, a couple of them leaning on the quartz countertop.

Ivy smiled. "Welcome home, Loren."

"Thanks." Her voice was small. Darien let go of her hand and pulled out a free stool for her at the island. "What are we doing?" she asked him.



“Have a seat,” was all he said.

She did.

Darien went to the fridge. Loren could feel the many eyes on her face, but every time she glanced at one of the Devils, they purposefully looked away from her. Even Mortifer was watching from behind the cereal boxes, most of his body hidden behind the box of shredded wheat. The Familiars too. They were sprawled across the carpet and the assortment of furniture in the sitting room, their glowing eyes probing.

Loren had never felt so seen in all her life.

When Darien came back to the island, he carried a box of crackers in one hand, a glass of water in the other. He gave a pointed look at her tattoo; the serpent-entwined rod was emitting a mix of red and blue light. “Your blood sugar is low.” He set the crackers and water in front of her. “Drink first.” His eyes were slightly guarded, and she wasn’t sure why. A voice in the back of her mind wondered why he wasn’t giving her juice, like he usually did whenever her blood sugar dipped too low.

But she trusted him. She would always trust him.

So, she picked up her glass and drank, all eyes on her. When she reached the last swallow, Darien’s fingers latched onto the bottom of her glass. He tipped it back, making sure she swallowed all of it.

Loren set down the glass. A series of shivers ran over her body, making her feel ice-cold and boiling-hot all at once.

That was when Loren realized that what he’d made her drink wasn’t water at all.

Darien said, “Tell me where you’ve been lately.”

“Spirit Terra.” Her body nearly crumpled with relief as the words came easily, her tongue finally liberated.

“And who’ve you been with?”

“The emperor,” she replied. “And Klay. And the emperor’s men. Johnathon Kyle too.” Her body was weak. She slumped in her chair, a sob rising in her throat. “Calanthe was there too,” she added, the words broken with emotion, “until she was killed.”

Darien had figured it out. He’d found a way to break the spell on her, and she...she was free.

He leaned on the counter, crossing his arms on the quartz. “Can you tell us what they’ve been making you do in Spirit, sweetheart?”

The words came easily. She didn’t have to fight with them, and now that the spell was gone, she spoke quickly, setting them all free. She told them everything: about the Veils the emperor was forcing her to lower; about the pillars; about her lessons with Agatha; about the demon being attracted to her at the carnival; about the demon in the school and how she’d torn a rip in the Veil with her magic in the

library.

And how she swore she had seen the Well. She knew where it was, what it looked like. She had seen it the night of the carnival, when the Shucca had come out of the Void.

A tree glowing teal, its aggressive root system doming above a pool of luminescent water.

Tanner was the first to speak. "Tamika was right."

"Tamika *and* Arthur," Jack amended.

Travis said, "How would we ever get by without him?"

"It's my fault," Loren said. Her voice crackled, tattoo flaring. Darien opened the box of saltines and ripped open a sleeve, pushing them her way. "I'm responsible for all the monsters coming through. I don't know how to use my magic, and because of it I've been weakening the Veil. The weather, too. The frost, the bloody lakes. All of it is because of *me*—"

"Stop," Darien said softly.

When Loren looked up at him, she realized there were tears in her eyes, the moisture blurring his face.

"None of this is your fault," Darien said. "Not a goddamn thing." He gestured to the crackers. "Eat."

"He's right," Ivy said. "We love you, Loren. We'll help fix this."

Loren took out a stack of crackers and started eating. After she'd choked a few back, she whispered, "What do we do?"

The room was silent.

Darien said, "You let me worry about that."

But Loren wasn't finished. There was more she wanted to say—so much more. "I left that night...", she began. She was looking only at Darien, her words all for him, her heart breaking at the memory. "When I saw you in the basement with those men, I didn't leave because I was afraid of you. I left because the imperator threatened me. He told me to meet him at my school. He said if I didn't go, he would kill you. *All of you.*" The longer she spoke, the harder her words shook. "He sent me photographs of the house, but he removed them from my phone before I could show you. He was watching the house. Watching all of us."

Darien's eyes were soft with understanding, but she saw hatred simmering within—a hatred she knew was directed inward.

He was blaming himself for not seeing clearly.

"That was why you asked me to take you to the school," Ivy said, reaching across the island to rub a comforting hand down her shoulder.

"I never wanted to leave," Loren said. "But I wanted—I was trying to protect you guys." And they'd all respected her too much to dig deeper.

"You don't need to protect us, Calla," Max said. "You're part of the family now, which means we stand together. Against any threat."

"I didn't know how to tell you," she said, looking at the face of every Devil. Her family. "I tried to find a way around the magic, but I couldn't—" She faced Darien just as it dawned on her. "How?"

"I went to see the Widow."

The blood drained from her face, and her stomach dipped.

"Her cost was low." Darien cupped her cheek, thumb stroking her skin. "No asking price is too great for your safety, Loren."

Lace cut in. "What's the plan? For all we know, the magic that was keeping Loren from speaking might've already notified the imperator of what we've done."

Darien was still watching her, hand caressing her cheek. "Then we'll deal with it when the time comes."

"Aren't you worried at all?" Tanner asked.

Jack added, "Yeah, really. He's been watching the house."

"He won't come near the house." Darien's words were hard. He lowered his hand, his steel rings clanging on the quartz. "He wants Loren, not us. And we need to protect her."

"How do you know?" Lace whispered. "That he won't try anything with us?" There was real fear in her question.

"Because I will kill him." Darien's words were said with such certainty, they sent a chill up Loren's spine. "I would win, which is why he needed to get Loren away from me. I don't care if he's the imperator, his power doesn't exceed his status in society, and I will kill him if he comes near us."

Loren reached for his hand. It took him a moment to respond, his gaze hard with determination. But after a moment he was lacing his fingers with hers and tugging her out of her seat.

"I'll speak with you guys in a bit," Darien said. "If you leave the house, take someone with you. Keep an eye out, and be careful." He pulled her toward the entrance hall.

Loren wasn't sure why, but Darien was quiet as they walked. New tension had formed between them, and when she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, she found that she couldn't read his expression.

He didn't say anything until they were in their suite, the door shut behind them. The mirror had been replaced, every trace of the destruction he'd wrought gone. He let go of her hand, walked several feet into the room, and turned to face her. The look on his face was conflicted, his jaw flexing as he searched for the right words.

"Darien," she whispered. "What is it?"

"You said you were afraid you were losing me."

"I was," she said. "But I'm not anymore."

Darien's throat shifted with a swallow. "I am."

She took one step toward him. "What do you mean?"

"I have some questions."

She interlocked her fingers before her. "Okay."

It took him several minutes to find his words. He stood perfectly still, staring at the floor, arms crossed.

Finally, he spoke. "When you ran out on me...when you saw me collecting..." Those eyes met hers. They were guarded again, but she knew him well enough to see the many emotions quarreling within. "I know you said you didn't want to leave that night, but...I saw the look on your face. Your fear was real."

"I'm not afraid of you," she whispered.

Darien didn't buy it. And that look in his eyes—the hesitation, the defeat, the lack of hope—broke her heart. "I need for you to tell me if anything ever makes you uncomfortable or scared—"

"I am not afraid of you, Darien," she said again. "I might've been afraid of what I saw, but I could never be afraid of you." How could she ever be afraid of someone who'd sacrificed so much for her? Someone who'd saved her life more times than she could count? Someone who looked at her the way he was looking at her now, as if she was his whole world and he feared she was slipping away.

"I want to do better, Loren. I do. I'm trying, I'm just..." He sighed, pushing his hair back from his face, rings catching in the strands. "I'm fighting. Fighting with myself, with my Surges, with...with my grief." The last word was forced out on a strangled breath. His reluctance to speak of his inability to move on from his mother's death hung in the air between them, the pain he was feeling almost tangible. "I promise it won't always be like this."

Loren closed the distance between them. She took Darien's hands into her own, threading her fingers through his. "I'm with you," she told him. She looked up at him, forcing him to make eye contact with her. "If it's Darkslaying forever, then it's Darkslaying forever." She squeezed his hands. "I choose you, Darien. I will always choose you."

"The fact that you'd say that, after everything you've seen, everything you've learned about me... It makes me love you even more."

"I'm pretty new to this dating thing too," Loren said, the words thick with emotion. "But part of being in a relationship involves loving a person through everything—the good and the bad. I want every part of you. And if it's Darkslaying forever—"

"It won't be forever." The words were hoarse. "It won't be like this forever, Loren. I promise you that."

"Darien," she pleaded. "It's okay—"

"Listen, please. Sweetheart." It was a question, one he waited for

her to answer, so she did with a nod. “Since meeting you, I’ve realized how many years I’ve wasted, drifting in the dark. I had no purpose, no hope for the future, no joy. I wasn’t living, baby, I was existing, not really enjoying much of anything, and the things that I did enjoy, they were...wrong. Unfulfilling. And then you came along, and I could finally see the light again. My destination was—is you. Can you understand that? Loren?”

She nodded.

Darien’s thumbs brushed across the backs of her hands. “My destination has always been you.”

“Darien,” she whispered. Now, it was her turn to take a moment to find the right words. He waited with remarkable patience, just like he always did. “You don’t need to completely change your life to fit the future you think I should have—”

“I know, Loren,” he interrupted softly. “I know. I see that now, and I fucking love you for it. But this decision is as much for me as it is for you. Darkslaying will always be there, but you?” He stepped closer, so close that she could feel his body heat. “When I’m with you, I feel like I finally have a shot at being the man I always dreamed I could be. The one who doesn’t need to kill or hit things to find peace. This life of mine—it’s a crutch. It’s a coping mechanism, a means of survival, a way of getting by until something better comes along. *You’re* that something, Loren. You’re that something, and you’re finally here.”

Her vision blurred. “What about the others? You say you want to get out of slaying, but your family...”

“I’ll take care of them. I’ll always take care of them.” He raised both of her hands to his mouth and kissed the back of the left. “No one gets left behind.” He kissed that hand one more time before letting go, reaching up to cup her face.

And then he kissed her on the lips—the softest kiss he’d ever left on her mouth, the most careful. As if he were afraid to push her, to cross any boundaries that might cause her to withdraw into herself.

“Darien.” His name was uttered on a shaky breath.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

She slid a hand up the side of his neck, tracing the strong column of his throat with her thumb, and then around to the back of his head, his soft hair slipping between her fingers. “I need to be closer to you. Please.”

Fisting his hair, she pulled him down, closing her mouth over his.

They undressed each other, slowly, tenderly. As if it was their first time. Darien never stopped kissing her. She clung to him, her anchor in the storm of her life.

Gently, he led her over to the bed and lay her back on the covers, pulling a pillow down to cradle her head. He climbed onto the

mattress, sheets rustling, and hovered over her.

There were tears at the corners of her eyes; she hadn't realized when they'd got there. "There's so much more I want to say," she whispered.

He silenced her with a hand to her mouth. He bent over her, a strand of his hair grazing her cheek as he kissed a tear from the corner of her eye. "We have forever." He straightened, bending her legs to frame his hips. He didn't take his eyes off her once as he declared, "You and me, forever." He positioned himself at her entrance. "Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

He pushed himself inside her. A couple inches at first, and then he pulled back out again and started anew, like always.

She was tense. After everything that had happened, it was hard to relax. Fear stole through her, locking up her muscles.

"You can relax now, sweetheart," Darien whispered, thumb stroking her cheek. "You're with me." He retreated a little before easing back in, still taking it slow. "You're with me, and I've got you."

His words reassured her. She felt herself relax, muscles melting.

Darien pulled up the quilt so their lower halves were covered, creating a place of security for her, she realized. The gesture nearly made her cry.

Another careful push, and he was buried in her to the hilt. She rotated her hips, savoring how full she felt with him inside her. Being like this with Darien made her feel connected to him in a way she couldn't explain, not even to herself. She imagined this was what it felt like to have a soulmate; she was certain this man had been made for her.

"I thought you said you didn't make love," she said quietly. She tried to say it like it was a joke, referring to that memorable night in the dining room with him, but it came out as pained as she felt.

"I make love to you," he said, the words heartbreakingly gentle. "You are the exception to every one of my rules."

Darien did make love to her, slowly and thoroughly. With him on top of her, that secret she'd been forced to keep exposed at last, she felt safer than ever, like they really could tackle anything, as long as they had each other. He kept his thrusting slow. Deep. He stayed close the whole time, his chest touching hers, the pendants on his chains whispering across her skin. One inked hand was cupping the top of her head, thumb tracing a comforting pattern across her forehead, the other gripping her waist.

He bent to kiss her, the gesture as gentle as his movements.

When he pulled back, she breathed, "I love you, Darien." She clung to him, fingers digging into his biceps. "You're my everything."

His throat bobbed. “Don’t you do that. Don’t talk as if you’re going to lose me. If you lose me, that means I lose you too, and I can’t live with that.” He kissed her forehead. “I said forever, and I meant it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours. I’ll always be yours.”

His movements sped up, and he bent to rest his cheek on her shoulder. She clutched him to her, one hand at the back of his head, the other digging into his back. Her orgasm crested at nearly the same time as his. They dissolved into their pleasure together, their heavy breathing the only sound for a long while after.

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“Where did you learn how to do this?” Loren asked.

They were in the soaker tub in their suite. She was lying snug between Darien’s legs, her back resting against his chest. Hot water filled the tub nearly to the brim, clouds of fruit-scented bubbles sloshing over the edge and soaking the mat. He was braiding her hair into two sections, fingers weaving the strands over and under with impressive skill. Loren had to admit the pink-tinted bubbles formed a pretty comical contrast with the black-haired, tattooed Darkslayer. A Darkslayer covered in countless scars, those bubbles clinging to his skin.

“When my mom died, Ivy was upset because she didn’t know how to braid her own hair. My mom used to do it for her. So, I taught myself how. It was hard enough for the two of us to adjust to not having our mom around, never mind the countless things she did for us that we took for granted... The things we had no idea how to do on our own.” He finished off the first braid, tying the end with one of the tiny elastics resting on the tub’s edge. He moved onto the other side, fingers tickling her skin. “Braiding hair was the one thing I could fix, so I fixed it.”

A rush of emotion spread through her chest. “You’re incredible.”

A couple minutes passed as Darien finished braiding. When he reached the end and tied it, he said quietly, “I’ve done my best.”

Once the elastic was secured, she turned to face him, water lapping against the sides of the tub. “You *are* incredible, Darien. You need to start giving yourself more credit.”

Those large hands were suddenly gripping the backs of her thighs, pulling her up until she was straddling him. “How about my beautiful girl fucks me right here in this tub, and then we’ll talk about the credit I don’t give myself.” He grabbed a fistful of her ass and pulled her up

higher, his other hand dipping into the water between their bodies. His fingers circled his cock. She felt the crown of it rub along her entrance, nudging it. "Sound good?"

"That sounds really good." She'd barely got the last word out before he was easing her down. Slowly.

The rush of hot water that accompanied their joining made her gasp, the soft exhalation echoing through the bathroom. But soon he had her right full, no room for water, no space between them. They were as close as they could get, yet it never felt close enough.

"I need to tell you something," Darien said.

"Is it a good something?" She slid up a little before sinking back down, taking him in as far as she could.

"Yes."

"Then you can tell me."

His mouth twitched. There was something dancing in his eyes—joy, she thought. "You're the only woman I've ever let on top of me."

Loren searched his expression. That joy was still there. "Really?"

"Really."

"But..." She eased up a little, then back down. The friction, and that burning stare of his...they were both so good. "Didn't you ever want to have a woman on top of you?"

"I like to be in control of everything in my life," he said. "Letting someone else be on top takes that away from me." She heard all the words he didn't say: for her, he would relinquish control. Only her. "How does that make you feel?"

"Good," she breathed. Her legs trembled as she pushed herself back up again, bubbles sloshing. This was their third time today. They hadn't left their suite since he'd broken the enchantment on her tongue. Her whole body was sore, especially the area between her legs. But the pleasure was somehow doubled, just the way she liked it.

"Happy?" His deep voice was rougher than gravel.

She nodded, arms circling his neck. "Happy." Being on top of him had always made her feel powerful. But now that she knew she was the only person to ever top the leader of the Seven Devils... It made her really happy. It was such a small thing, but it filled her with so much joy, she could burst from it.

She kept her movements swift and deep, water splashing around them. He kept his hands on her ass, fingers digging into her skin, but he let her do all the work, not moving her once, only watching her in the way that only Darien could watch her, his stare hotter than the water.

Soon, the breaths he drew were as ragged as hers, and just as quick. He watched her intently, that gaze devouring every part of her body as she moved above him. That look spurred her to ride him



faster, her need to see him come undone, to please him, greater than the need for her own release. It was just him and her, her and him, and she never wanted anything else. She touched him with the kind of greed that was endless, hands running up the hard planes of his stomach, his chest.

She was full of him, the friction so good that every breath of hers was nearly a whimper. Water lapped against their bodies as she grinded into him, tilting her hips so his big cock hit that sweet spot deep inside her. She was almost there, and she wanted it so badly.

Darien squeezed her thighs, the most erotic groan climbing up his throat. "Don't stop." The sound of his voice made her orgasm arrive in full force. Her body twitched, her stomach bouncing, his name floating off her lips as she kept moving up and down, up and down, that look on his face feral. "Good girl. Just like that."

Her nails dug into his shoulders. She covered his mouth with hers and fucked him harder, water splashing, taking him in so deeply that every movement was brutal. Bruising. But she knew he loved it, so she didn't stop, and she loved it too, so she kept going. For the both of them.

His hands slid up her ass to press into the small of her back, arching her body against his as she bobbed up and down. Again and again. Her knee slipped. She fell into him, bubbles sloshing, her breasts flattening against his solid chest, but she did not stop, and soon their kissing was turning into biting, teeth nearly drawing blood, tongues clashing, his hand fisting her hair. Their bodies were slick, their hair damp with sweat and water, as they moved as one, lost in each other.

Several strokes later and Darien came hard, breaking the kiss with a low oath that snaked along the side of her neck, a shiver of delight rocking up her spine.

Three times in one night, and even though she was still catching her breath, she wanted to go again. But her movements slowed, and her eyelids drooped shut. She slumped against him, heart racing, and tucked her head under his chin. She was utterly spent, every limb boneless.

"Fuck, I love you," Darien breathed. He cupped the back of her head with one hand, his other arm wrapping firmly around her middle. "You are way too good to me."

"I guess we're a perfect match, then," Loren panted into his shoulder, her cheek sticking to his warm damp skin. "Because you are way too good to me, too."

"Mmm. You're right about one thing."

"What's that?"

"We're a perfect match."

She beamed up at him, only to find that he was already watching her.

“That’s my favorite thing in the world.” He used his small finger to trace her mouth. “Your smile. Actually...” A smile of his own teased his lips. “It might be tied with your laugh. I could get drunk off that sound.”

She reached up to push his wet hair out of his face, nails scraping just the way he liked it. Sure enough, he moaned in pleasure, his cock that was still stiff inside her twitching.

“The school’s having a dance tomorrow,” she said, lifting herself up a little on her knees. She tried not to laugh when Darien’s hand came down on the small of her back, stilling her. He pushed her down his length again, all the way to the thick base. “Will you go with me?” she asked.

This time, it was *his* turn to do the work. He started to move her, his hands cupping her backside. “It would be my absolute pleasure.” He kissed the tip of her nose, moving her faster. If they kept up with this, the water would soon be cold, if all of it wasn’t on the floor by then. When Darien spoke again, his voice was low, that familiar edge to it that accompanied his need for her. “Will you stand on my feet?”

“Do you want me to stand on your feet?” she countered.

He laughed softly and pressed another of those kisses, light as a butterfly’s touch, between her brows. “I want you to do whatever you want,” he said.

“Then I might stand on your feet.”

That smile spread into a grin. “I’m looking forward to it.”

They carried on into the night like that, until they were both too tired to keep going.

—

Loren woke up to the ragged squeals and yowls of a rubber chicken. The gasping, piercing shrieks meant Bandit was already awake, destroying the toy with the help of Twitch, by the sound of it. Twitch always made the most ridiculous, hyenalike noises; there was no mistaking him. The Familiars chased each other through the hallways, paws pounding, every bark and snarl broken up the wheezing of a squeak toy being pulverized.

Darien was still asleep, his strong arms wrapped tightly around her middle. His warm hands were cupping her waist, his cheek pressed against her hip. He was breathing quietly, every exhalation tickling her.

At least, she’d *thought* he was asleep. But then he groaned. “I should never have bought him that thing,” he mumbled against her

skin.

She ran a hand through his hair—the hair that still smelled like the fruity bubbles from their bath last night. The very recent memory made the space between her legs pulse. “What did you say he named it again?”

“Cluckles,” Darien slurred, voice thick and gravelly with sleep.

Loren laughed.

The noise continued for about ten minutes before Darien bolted up in irritation, throwing the sheets and quilt aside. “Alright, I’m up.”

Loren got ready for the day while Darien made breakfast. She tried on her dress again in anticipation of tonight’s dance, screeching at Darien when he tried to open the door and peek. He wasn’t allowed to see her in it until later. She wanted to keep it a surprise.

The morning passed too quickly, and then it was time for her to go.

She stood in the entrance hall, unable to take her eyes off Darien as he fastened the strap on her watch.

Well, technically it wasn’t *her* watch. But he’d insisted she borrow it.

“Where did you get this?” she asked. The watch was discreet. The silicone band was blush-pink, the face decorated with flower designs.

“It’s one of Ivy’s. Turn the face clockwise, and you’ll be able to talk to me.” With the strap now fastened, his fingers circled her wrist, thumb pressing lightly on the pulse on the inside of it.

When he bent to kiss her, she got greedy. She fisted his hair, pulling him down further, closer. He spread her lips with his tongue, the hand that was still gripping her wrist moving to the small of her back. He tugged her close, his stomach bumping hers.

“We’re going to be late,” she managed to say.

“How about you skip class?” he mumbled against her mouth.

“How about you stop being a bad influence?” She had a lot of studying to catch up on after all those distractions from the emperor.

Darien chuckled. “*You’re* the bad influence.” With reluctance, he let go of her and bopped her on the nose with a finger. “The others will be taking shifts watching the school. You’ll be safe, I promise. And if anything happens...” He held up her wrist. “You contact me. Okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

The rubber chicken howled again. Bandit had it by the neck in the kitchen. He was whipping it back and forth, rubber feet flapping.

Darien tipped his head back and rolled his eyes. “*Bandit!*” he bellowed.

The yowls immediately tapered off. Bandit looked at him in question, chicken still trapped in his teeth.

“Cluckles is getting a time-out,” Darien said, pointing an accusing

finger. “No more rubber chicken for the day.”

Loren listened for a reply, but if the Familiar responded, she didn’t hear it. His words were only for Darien.

And then Bandit trotted off, disappearing to the couches, by the looks of it, dropping the chicken on the way in a puddle of drool.

“What did he say?” Loren whispered.

“He said he’s glad to have you home.”

Loren tsked. “Yeah right.”

Darien tugged her away from the door and opened it. “I might’ve fudged his words a little in the past, but that was all him, I swear.”

She backed away from the door, nearly tripping over her feet. Her wide eyes flicked about the yard, quiet save a jasmine-scented breeze and the tinkling of windchimes. “Shouldn’t we be using Arthur’s car?”

“I’m not hiding anymore,” Darien said. “He wants you, he’ll have to get through me. I’m not standing by while he uses you like a puppet.”

Despite the surety of his words, her stomach dipped, her throat tightening with nerves. “He’s the imperator.” The most powerful person in Terra. “He could kill you.”

“Not if I kill him first.”

“Darien—”

“Stop worrying. I *will* protect you. Hiding from him won’t do anything.” He spanked her ass. “Now get in the car.”

She swallowed her fears and stepped out into the crisp morning air, skirt fluttering. “Love you, Bandit,” she called over her shoulder.

Darien followed. “He says he loves you too.” He shut the door.

“That one was so totally a lie,” Loren accused, clomping down the front steps.

“Maybe.” Darien caught up to her, boots pounding, and grabbed her hand. “But he’ll warm up to you.” He bumped a playful shoulder against hers. “Just like I did.”

Loren wasn't sure how the professors at Angelthene Academy had managed to make the school look even more magical than it already did, but somehow, they had succeeded.

Garlands of white roses and silver-dollar eucalyptus were draped across doorways and windows. The banisters of the main staircase were wrapped with them, and vases that were full to bursting sat on every table and sill. Brass lanterns floated about by enchantment, lighting up the path from the front gates, down the steep hill, and all the way to the front entrance of the school. In the dining hall, desserts were piled high on tables that were draped with shimmering white cloth. There was an entire wall of champagne flutes, crystal stems glinting.

Loren snatched a glass off the wall and downed the contents. The bubbles burned her nose and made her eyes water.

Sabrina chimed a laugh. "You're going to be drunk by the time Darien gets here."

Slapping her chest as the fizz worked its way through her, she managed to bite out, "Darien is exactly why I'm drinking. I'm nervous."

Dallas joined them, shoving a whole chocolate cupcake in her mouth as she walked, her cream dress swishing. "Why are you nervous?" she asked, mouth full. "Don't you want Darien to come?"

"Of course I do," Loren said. She smoothed her satin gown, the color bluer than her eyes. "But I'm half-expecting the professors to refuse to let him in. And if they don't, I'll be dancing on the street with him."

"Didn't they approve your guest slip?" Sabrina asked.

"I'll believe it when I see it." The fact that Darien had dealt with the demon in the library had definitely helped their odds for tonight. If the headmaster hadn't seen it with his own eyes, they would've stamped her guest slip with a big fat NO. There was no lying where spells were involved, and she wouldn't have felt good about sneaking him in on a night like tonight, even if Tanner *was* able to do it. She wanted to enjoy the dance without needing to hide or use glamours. She wanted Darien beside her, his identity in plain sight, where they could just be normal together. He deserved that too. He would be gawked at, that was a given. But she wanted him in her life in every way possible. Tattoo and all.

Dallas dusted crumbs off her hands. "Max and I will join you if that happens. If they don't let Darien in, they won't be letting Max in either."

Loren shrugged. "True."

"Should we head to the dance floor?" Sabrina asked.

Dallas took her phone out from where she'd stuffed it in the front of her dress, the padding in her corset concealing it surprisingly well. Another glamour, most likely. "Max says they're almost here," Dallas said, fingers moving lightning fast as she texted back, "and the traffic is making Darien rip his hair out."

"Let's go," Sabrina said. "I told Logan I would be on the dance floor at eight."

—

Darien pulled up by the gates of Angelthene Academy, his car headlights illuminating the back of Jack's jeep. Jack stood at the front of it with Travis, the two of them on watch duty, their presence here having allowed Darien and Maximus to prepare for the dance without worrying about Loren, Dallas, and Sabrina.

"You nervous?" Max asked as he fixed his hair in the small mirror in his sun visor.

"Nervous about what?" Darien shut off the vehicle. "A school dance is far easier than ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the shit we've both been through."

And ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the shit they still had to go through, starting tonight. This dance was the one break he would get before being thrown into a battle to seal the Veil. Arthur was nearly done with Randal's half of the Master Scroll; he'd called Darien an hour ago to let him know he'd found out enough about the Well and the rip into Spirit Terra to potentially fix this mess. To seal it again and stop the imperator in his tracks.

Max slapped the sun visor back up. "I just know I'm going to knock something over," he grumbled.

"I'll make sure to have my camera ready so we can immortalize the moment."

"Dick." He opened his door and stepped out into the bitterly cold night, Darien doing the same.

Travis and Jack came around to meet them, the tail end of their conversation fading into silence.

"Thanks, guys," Darien said. "We can take it from here."

Jack was grinning. "You sure we can't get in on the fun?"

"The teachers hardly agreed to having two Darkslayers as guests tonight," Darien said. "I highly doubt they'd want four."

Travis sighed longingly. "I should get me a girlfriend so I can know what it's like to go to these mushy events."

"You?" Jack scoffed. "Girlfriend? Zero-commitment Travis?"

Trav punched Jack in the shoulder.

"You've had plenty of opportunities for that, Trav," Darien said with a smile. He fixed the sleeves that were pinned at his forearms and made for the gates, Maximus at his side. "Catch you boys later."

---

As Loren wove her way through the crowd, Sabine and Dallas at her sides, she had to pick up the train of her gown to avoid stepping or tripping on it. The place was packed full of witches, warlocks, vampires, werewolves, and a few hellseers.

The gymnasium had been transformed into a nightclub. More tables lined the far wall, and countless white streamers and garlands adorned every doorway and window. Strobe lights pulsed to the beat of the music, drowning out the voices of the hundreds of people crowding the long room. Loren's heels vibrated with the bass as they made their way across the dance floor, weaving around bodies.

Dallas had to shout to be heard. "Let's go get some punch! I'm choking on that cupcake."

They were halfway across the room when Logan intercepted them, sweeping Sabine off her feet.

Sabine squealed in surprise, glossy black hair fanning out, just like her black dress, as he spun her in a circle. Once he set her back down, her face was flushed, a reaction Loren knew had little to do with how dizzy she was and a lot to do with the werewolf, whose arms circled her waist, holding her tight.

Dallas gestured to his tux. "Wow, looking good, Shadowback."

"You too, matchstick." She stuck her tongue out at him. He glanced at Loren. "Nice to have you back."

"Nice to *be* back."

He kissed Sabine's temple. "I'm stealing this one."

"Have fun," Loren said.

He winked and tugged her away, the bodies of the other dancing students swallowing them up.

"Looks like it's just us now," Dallas said. She made for the bowl of punch on the table. She grabbed the ladle and scooped some into a plastic cup. "Wouldn't it be weird if we married Max and Darien? We'd be sisters *and* sisters-in-law."

Loren laughed. "I like how you went from not wanting to officially date Max to talking about marrying him."

"What can I say?" Dallas waggled her copper eyebrows. "The guy's

a catch.” Something caught her eye. She jerked her chin at the main entrance and took a long gulp of punch. “Speaking of catches. How much you want to bet we’ll be the talk of the school all week?”

Considering how many people had already noticed the two Devils walking through the doorway, Dallas was probably correct.

Butterflies rioted in Loren’s stomach, a nervous sweat breaking out on her back and palms. Too bad her dress was made of satin; she could really use something absorbent to dry her hands on. “How about all year?” Her voice was breathy and weak.

Dallas watched as more heads turned. “Yeah, you might be right.” She drained the last of her punch. “Logan Sands, Maximus Reacher, and Darien Cassel all in one building. What a night to remember.”

And then Darien and Max were there. They both looked stunning in black button-up shirts and pants, the product in their hair reflecting blue under the pulsing lights. Even if they weren’t slayers, everyone would’ve stared, she was certain.

Dallas elbowed her in the ribs. “Have fun,” she crooned with a flutter of her fingertips. She took Max’s outstretched hand and vanished into the crowd.

When Darien stepped closer, Loren felt the air between them charge with the best kind of tension. “Hey there, Ocean Eyes.” He looked her over from head to toe, one corner of his mouth creeping up. “Damn.”

She huffed a laugh, her cheeks full of blush. “Yeah?”

“Very *yeah*. You’re breathtaking. How’d I get so lucky?”

She tucked a strand of softly curled hair behind her ear. “Thanks.”

“Do you think you’ll always behave like this?” His tone was curious.

She pouted her lips in thought, not understanding. Darien’s attention zeroed in on her mouth, his stare like fire. “Like what?” she asked.

“Shy around me.”

“Oh, probably,” she admitted. “Do you want me to try not to be?”

“I never want you to change.”

As Darien reached for her hands, she glanced about the room, heart lurching into a gallop. “This is really awkward,” she hissed. “Everyone is staring.” She hadn’t given much thought to how she would really feel tonight, having a Devil beside her, all eyes on them.

“So what?” He interlocked his fingers with hers.

“Aren’t you worried about everyone knowing that you’re dating a human?” He was one of the scariest people in the city. The last thing she would want was to wreck the reputation he’d built for himself.

Darien’s mouth tightened, the rage in his eyes downright terrifying. “I *want* them to know that I’m dating a human. What difference does



it make? I'm with you, you're with me, and if the rest of the world thinks it's wrong, then fuck them." He pulled her close, winding his arms around her lower back. She was so close to him, she stepped on his shoe. "*This* is right." His arms lightly squeezed her. "They're wrong." With a tilt of his head, he gestured to the people staring, several of those people shying away from the simple gesture, their cowardly gazes falling to the floor. "Now will you forget about them and dance with me?"

She gulped. "What if I fall?"

"Then I will catch you. I will always catch you." He didn't give her another chance to argue.

He tugged her out into the middle of the gymnasium. People moved out of the way. Loren had to admit it was kind of funny to see them bend like this. If only she was given this kind of space in the hallways.

They started slow, moving to their own pace. She stood on Darien's feet, not because she felt like she needed to, but because a part of her knew that he wanted her to.

After several minutes, she noticed his attention had strayed, the muscles in his arms hardening. "Something tells me you're giving some students the death glare." She eyed him with suspicion, tilting her head to try to snag his gaze, but he didn't give it to her. She wondered who he was staring at. "Are you giving them the death glare?" she persisted.

"I'm not." Darien still wasn't looking at her. And that look on his face? That was his petrifying stare-at-her-I-dare-you look.

"Darien," she reprimanded, fingers tightening on his shoulders, grasping the smooth fabric of his shirt. "Don't lie."

"I'm not," he said again, his attention finally settling on her. "I'm just making sure they know not to fuck with what's mine." Oh boy. Someone had definitely gotten his attention.

Loren tsked. "Yeah, that's called a death glare, handsome."

She looked over her shoulder to see Ethan, Chad, and Garrett watching out of the corners of their eyes.

When she turned back around to face Darien, he was smiling at her, the very soft tilt of his lips barely detectable. The threat in his eyes—the one aimed at the three boys she could no longer see—still lingered.

"They won't bother you again," Darien declared.

No. No, they certainly wouldn't.

He shifted his feet out from under hers, being careful not to make her trip in her high heels. "Can I spin you?"

The laugh she snorted embarrassed her, but she quickly forgot about it when she saw Darien's smile grow. "You want to spin me?"

she asked.

He did, not waiting for her approval. The movement was smooth as liquid, and she somehow managed not to step on her dress.

She did one complete rotation, and when she stopped, Darien was watching her, that smile still there, a sparkle in his eyes.

"I've always wanted to do that," he said.

"Have you never danced like this before?"

"My kind of dancing is usually...dirty." He grimaced, but it passed quickly. In its place was bliss. Pride. "But I always dreamed I would find a girl worth spinning one day. *You're* a girl worth spinning." He gripped her tighter, pulling her flush against his chest. "My girl." Her whole body heated up from the statement.

"Forever your girl," she promised.

"Forever my girl."

He bent to kiss her—

His phone started buzzing. He took his phone out of his pocket and answered the call, speaking too quietly for her mortal ears to pick up on any of the words. But the look on his face told her enough.

Something was wrong.

Finally, he hung up.

"What is it?" she asked.

He put his phone in his pocket. "Blood Moon." He caught Max's eye and waved him over. Dallas followed, her hand in Max's. Soon Logan and Sabrina were hurrying over as well.

As soon as they were in earshot, Darien spoke.

"Lace just called," he said, keeping his voice quiet. "There's a Blood Moon tonight." Although a Blood Moon wasn't anything new to the people of Terra, everyone understood from the tone of Darien's voice that something made tonight—made *this* Blood Moon—different from all the rest. "Demons are being drawn out of Spirit Terra."

"The Blood Moon is calling them out?" Max's words were hushed.

"We can't wait any longer. I need to try to shut the gate *now*," Darien said. "If those things get through, the city won't stand a chance."

"We," Max corrected. "You're not going alone."

"How can we help?" Logan asked.

"Get your packs together. Hunt down any of the demons that come through." He faced Max. "I need you to watch this school."

Loren understood that Max's instructions didn't involve protecting the school so much as they involved protecting her.

"Darien." Loren grabbed him by the wrist, his pulse thumping out a determined beat under her fingers.

"I need you to stay in this school."

"But—"

He stepped closer. Took her face into his warm hands. "When this is over, I'm taking you to see the stars. We'll go for dinner at the Lakehouse." His thumbs brushed her cheeks, leaving trails of that same blazing heat on her skin, the wildly addicting sensation never lasting long enough. "And then I'm taking you to see the stars."

Loren swallowed, her throat tight. "Promise."

He bent to press his lips against hers. "I promise," he said. He kissed her again—one more time. Briefly. Softly. "Stay in this school."

And then he was gone. She stood there in the pulsing lights and thumping music as she watched him go.

The others met Darien at Hell's Gate. Now that the dance was nearly over, Max and Conrad were stationed near Angelthene Academy, standing guard in case the girls encountered any trouble. As for the others, they were all here. Arthur too.

Darien had called the Angels as well. After sending Conrad to join Max, Dominic and Hanli had shown up, Blue with them. Aside from Max, the only Devil not present was Tanner, who was still upstairs somewhere, doing the-gods-knew-what. The house was bustling as everyone prepared their weapons, Fleet bodysuits on. The light of the chandelier in the entrance hall reflected brightly in the glossy black material.

"This friend of yours," Darien said to Arthur, who'd just finished doling out the rings to everyone gathered in the entrance hall. "He used to work in the Fleet weaponry too?"

Arthur nodded. "He did indeed." He gestured to the onyx bands on everyone's fingers, the seams nearly undetectable once the suits were fully on. "Do try not to lose those. They're expensive." Too bad the magic of the suits only went so far when you were up against the disgustingly powerful demons of Spirit Terra.

"Good thing you're not the one paying," Darien said with a smirk.

Arthur frowned. "Your wallet isn't bottomless, Darien."

"Really?" Darien crooned. "I didn't know."

Arthur snickered, but he was soon changing his tune, every trace of humor vanishing from his face. When he spoke next, he addressed everyone in the room. "I finished translating Calanthe's half of the scroll," he said proudly, "and fixing her mistranslations, which I will fill you in on another time."

"And?" Darien prompted. Whatever information Arthur uncovered, they would surely need tonight.

"The Veils in Spirit can be held open for ease of crossing by pillars made of adamant."

"What's adamant?" Lace asked.

"It's the same thing," Arthur said, reaching into his pocket, "that this here rock is made of." He produced a moon-shaped stone the size of his palm. The stone Arthur had been studying at Witchlight for Roark.

"You finished our Rock Hunt?" Darien joked. He stepped closer, eyeing the luminescent teal lines cutting through the rock. He took it

from him and turned it over.

There was teal only on one side. And everywhere the adamant touched, Darien's skin tingled as if he'd been stung by a bunch of bees, even through the thick glove of the bodysuit.

"How do we shut the Veil?" Darien asked. "Did the scroll say?"

"Not in a language easy to understand," Arthur said.

"Of course not."

"My translations are correct, but they are a touch convoluted, and my understanding of them is weak, I must admit. But it speaks of that stone." Arthur nodded in its direction. "Erasmus Sophronia named it Moonstone."

Dom gave a husky laugh. "Not very creative."

"And," Arthur continued, "it has a counterpart called Sunstone. If my translations are correct, you will need the Sunstone to seal the Veil."

The hope in Darien's chest deflated. "Where do we find that?"

"That, I'm afraid I don't know. But it was Roark who gave me that stone." Now that they knew the stone was connected to Erasmus and the spirit realm, Roark's request for Arthur to do research on the stone made much more sense than it had that day Darien had visited Arthur in Witchlight. "If I were you," Arthur said, "I would speak to him."

"Easier said than done," Lace grumbled.

"I bet Dallas can help," Darien said. Her parents might be hard on her, but Taega had pulled through when they'd needed her last time. Maybe she would do it again. "I'll give Max a call and see if he can speak with her." He studied the Moonstone again, holding it up under the bright light of the chandelier.

That was when it hit: his recognition.

He'd felt this stinging feeling before.

"That day in Witchlight," he began, speaking to Arthur. "I only saw one side of the stone." He held it up so the side with the teal webbing faced Art. "I've seen this before. There was a piece of this same material that looked like a blade in the Crossroads out in Whitebridge."

Ivy cut in. "You said you used it to kill that demon."

"Ivyana," Darien said, snapping his fingers. "You're a goddamn genius." He pocketed the stone and walked over to the glass table. He found his keys among the coins and tossed them to Arthur, who caught them with a grunt of surprise. "I need you to go to Whitebridge. Find the blade under the Fig. You should have no problem getting in without the Soul-eater there." He gestured to Lace. "Take Lacey with you."

The blonde slid yet another gun into her weapons belt. "Then what?" she asked.

"I need Arthur to turn that blade into smaller weapons." If anyone could do such a thing this quickly, it was Arthur. "Usable daggers—whatever you can give us, I will take. If the creatures coming out of Spirit Terra are anything like the one at the carnival, we're going to need an easier way to kill them." With Gaven's supply of ammunition containing aura magic destroyed, that black adamant might be the only chance they had against the demons. He jerked his chin at Arthur, who was looking at Darien's car keys as if they might bite him. "Drive it like you stole it."

Arthur gave him a look of horror. "No, *Lacey* will drive it like she stole it. I'm not getting behind that wheel." He walked over to Lacey and handed her the keys.

The two of them left the house, closing the door behind them, Darien's car engine snarling to life a minute later.

Darien turned the face of his watch until he heard it click. He lifted his wrist to his mouth. "Loren?"

A minute passed before she answered. "I'm here."

"Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," she said. "I'm getting ready for bed."

"Be safe, okay?"

"No, *you* be safe," she argued. Darien smiled. "I love you."

"Love you too, Rookie." He clicked it off and returned to getting his weapons together.

He was nearly finished when a folded up sheet of paper on the glass table caught his eye. It was wedged under the wooden bowl, only a corner of it showing.

He tugged it out and unfolded it. Quickly, he read the words scrawled across it, drowning out the noise of the others still preparing and talking.

It was a goodbye letter signed by Cyra.

Darien flipped it around, showing the others in the room. "Where'd this come from?"

"It was in Loren's planner," Travis said. "She dropped it that day she came to the house. I meant to give it back to her, but I forgot."

Darien turned the letter back around, reading it again. "*Ignite me, Phoenix,*" he read aloud. "That's a weird way to sign a letter."

Ivy walked over and read over his shoulder. "Wait..."

Darien glanced at her. "What?"

"I've seen Dallas using this paper," she murmured. "See these little stars down in the corner here?" She showed Darien.

The others gathered around.

"What about them?" Darien asked.

"It's enchanted paper. It's a brand new thing that's all the rage in schools right now. They're looking to ban it."

*Ignite me, Phoenix...*

Darien took a lighter out of his pocket and sparked it. All eyes were on him as he lit one corner of the letter.

The paper caught quickly, flames spreading all the way up to the top corners. Darien went to the fireplace in the library, everyone following on his heels, their confusion tangible. He crouched down on the hardwood floor and laid the paper down flat in the ashes. The ashes were old; they only ever lit the fireplaces on cool nights, and only when Max wasn't at the house. Max hated fire.

The letter didn't burn. It didn't even curl or blacken. Instead, once the flames had passed over the whole sheet of paper, the fire went out, new words now covering its surface.

Darien read them quickly, eyes flicking over the paper. The more he read, the sicker he felt.

Someone had forced Cyra to write this letter. Someone had made her write it, so her sudden absence wouldn't draw attention from the people who cared about her.

What the person who'd made her write it hadn't anticipated was the letter being written on enchanted stationary.

This wasn't a goodbye letter. It was a cry for help.

The spells over the school went out.

The sudden absence of magic was a feeling Loren would never get used to. It made her feel stripped down to her core, as if her skin, along with her clothes, had been peeled away.

There had been plenty of times throughout her life when the spell systems experienced blips, kind of like how electricity could surge, causing the lights to dim for a fraction of a second before returning to full brightness.

Tonight was different. As she waited in the communal bathrooms on the same floor as the House of Salt, her wavy hair partially dried after the shower she'd taken to scrub all the hairspray out, she realized the spells weren't coming back on.

Wearing only her pajamas and sneakers with no socks, she shouldered her bag of clothes and hurried out into the hallway.

The school had dissolved into utter chaos. Students were everywhere, bodies jostling her, elbows nearly hitting her in the face. The voices of different professors rose above the din as they directed everyone, not toward their dorms, but toward the safety shelters.

With the spells out, and the Blood Moon climbing higher in the sky, there was no telling what could happen. Whenever a Blood Moon rose, every demon in Terra was called out of their dens to hunt, as if hypnotized, their eyes redder than the moon. Even the Nameless, the most dangerous of all creatures, were allowed to venture beyond their limits until the sun came up. Piling into the shelters was the safest choice.

But where were Dallas and Sabrina?

Loren felt like a fish attempting to swim upstream as she pushed past the students that were all heading toward the shelters.

She couldn't see them.

But then she spotted a familiar face in the crowd up ahead.

Her father.

"Dad?" she called. Once he was close enough, she stopped, taking elbows in the sides and back as students continued to pass her by. "What are you doing here?"

"Quinton is coming for you," Erasmus hissed, eyes bolted wide with terror. "You have to get out of here."

"Max and Conrad are out front—"

"You need to get to them," he panted. "Now."



"I need to find Dallas and Sabrina." She wouldn't leave them. With the spells in the school out, the safest place was Hell's Gate. A House Hob like Mortifer could keep spell systems in place, even during a magic outage. They had to get there.

"Now, Loren," Erasmus gritted out. "Your friends are out front." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her through the droves of students, toward the staircase that led down to the entrance hall.

There was something off about her father's speech.

Loren tried to see through the tall windows by the doors as she followed Erasmus down the stairs. There weren't many students in this area, most of them already in the shelters. "I don't see them," she said.

"They're with Max."

"You're not stuttering." She yanked her arm free.

Slowly, Erasmus turned to face her.

There was a roaring in her ears. Anger coursed like hot lava through her veins. "How long?" she demanded.

He gave a nervous laugh. "How long what, Miss Calla?"

There it was.

"I said how long?"

He reached for her.

She backed away.

"When you came to see me at Agatha's," Loren said, her voice low and steady. "Was that when it started? Or was it before?"

Erasmus's face was a cold mask. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You didn't want your picture taken." Because photographs—cameras—didn't lie. Glammers could not trick them.

"Loren." Erasmus's—the stranger's tone shifted toward urgent. Demanding. Unkind. "We need to hurry."

"Who are you?" She backed up, her heels striking the steps as she blindly climbed them. She was painfully aware of how little distance stood between her and the stranger—and painfully aware of how far she was from Maximus. From safety.

"It's me. Your father."

Those were her father's clothes, her father's face, his body.

But this wasn't her father.

The *clothes*... Her mind spun as she remembered.

His townhouse had been broken into. That was where it had started.

The deception. The lie.

"You're not my dad."

Just as she was rallying her magic, the solar pendant lighting up under her shirt, those ocean eyes flicked over her shoulder.

A hand clamped over her mouth.

That hand held a rag that reeked of chemicals.

She passed out instantly, magic retreating back into her core, pendant turning cold, as the chloroform flooded her airways.

---

Max wasn't answering his phone. Neither was Conrad.

This was the third time Darien had called them in the last two minutes.

Voicemail picked up—

"Shit." Darien hung up. Strode to the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall, the others stepping aside to let him through. "Atlas!" he called. No answer. "*Tanner!*"

Another long moment passed before Tanner rushed down the stairs, boots thumping.

Darien spoke before he had a chance to. "I need you to go to the school. Check on Max and the girls—" Darien's voice tapered off, brow furrowing at the look on Tanner's face. "What's the matter?"

Tanner pushed his glasses onto his head. "I know this is lousy timing, but I have to tell you. I've been looking into Nolan for a couple days—"

"I thought you said you found docs on him."

"Darien," Jack tried. "It's getting pretty red out there."

Darien held up a silencing hand.

Tanner blurted, "Finn's been leading you on."

Darien's thoughts disintegrated. The others murmured behind him.

"There is no Detective Nolan," Tanner went on. "I ran a reverse image search—the MPU was using some random guy's photo. Someone who died fifty years ago. That Blood Stave attack at the school, the one that killed all those kids—one of those kids was Finn's son. We didn't know—none of us knew, we didn't hear about it because his son had a different last name. Finn must've asked you to help take down Gaven to get revenge for his kid dying." And Gaven manipulating Darien for power and monetary gain had only helped Finn's case, the threats Gaven made on his home, family, and life pushing him to agree to help Finn. Tanner's breathing shifted to a pant. "I'm sorry, Darien. It was my fault. I didn't look close enough. I was distracted. I should've—"

Darien took out his phone and made a call. The line rang three times before a woman picked up.

"Thank you for calling Angelthene's Magical Protections Unit. How can I help you?"

"Put me through to your Head Detective," Darien said.

"One moment please."

There was a pause, and then a familiar husky voice came through the speaker. He sounded tense, as if the last thing he had time for right now was a phone call. "Solace—"

Darien hung up. The room spun as anger flooded his veins.

"I'm sorry," Tanner mouthed.

His phone started vibrating in his tight grip. He barely felt his own body react as he answered the call. "Cassel."

Max's voice ripped through the speaker. "Loren's gone, man! I don't know what hit me, but I got knocked on my fucking ass, I don't know what by—I couldn't move. Conrad too. Shit, man, she was taken by the emperor—"

Darien felt like someone had shoved his head under water. His surroundings bled away, panic threatening to swallow him whole.

If something bad happened to Loren, he would never forgive himself.

He'd made a mistake. Another fucking mistake. He shouldn't have left her with only Conrad and Max to look after her, should've stayed with her himself—

"Max." Darien somehow managed to keep his voice steady.

A female voice floated through the background.

Darien said, "Is that Dallas?"

"Yeah," Max gritted out. "Sab went to find Logan—"

"I need you to go with Dallas and find Erasmus and Cyra. Bring them to me, I have questions for him—"

"I thought Cyra left town."

Darien quickly filled him in on what the letter had revealed. And then he concluded, "I bet you Erasmus doesn't have what they need to get the Well anymore, and once they figured out he was useless they kept him hostage so he wouldn't speak. Cyra wrote in the letter that they're being kept at Lucent Enterprises."

"What about you?" Max was still catching his breath.

"I'm going with the others to shut the Veil. But I need to get Loren first." The emperor was taking her into Spirit—he knew he was. Which meant he would need to get into the tunnels and find their Life Clocks—

God fucking damnit. He should never have left her.

"I'll call you," Max said.

Darien hung up. The others had heard the entire call.

Travis said, "We're going to have to kill him. Aren't we?" The emperor. They would've avoided it in favor of simply shutting the gate to stop his plans, but now, with Loren's life directly on the line like this...

"If that's what it takes," Darien said. With a steadying breath, he declared, "I *will* make her safe again." His heart pounded so hard he

thought he might throw up. "Even if it's the last thing I do."

He walked over to the fridge, where his Hob was watching from his usual spot by the many boxes of cereal.

"Morty, I need you to do me a favor," Darien began, every word tense, every breath shallow. He needed to stay calm, but he felt like he couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. The Hob cocked his head. "Can you go into Spirit Terra and look for Loren? Can you do that for me?"

The Hob nodded.

"Be careful." Darien formed a fist with his right hand and gave the Hob the best smile he could manage. "Fist bump?"

Mortifer formed a tiny fist and bumped it against Darien's.

"See you in a bit," Darien said.

Mortifer vanished into a puff of sparkling black smoke.

And then Darien was back in the entrance hall. "Dom," he called, nodding at the Angel. "Think you can go meet up with Max?" With those demons coming out of the gate, and the waves of power rendering them useless every time they blasted through, he wouldn't leave anyone shorthanded.

"Sure thing."

Blue stepped forward. "I'll go," she said, grasping onto Dominic's arm. "I'll go with him."

They left, Dominic carrying Blue as he shot into the sky.

Darien faced the entrance hall full of people. Ivy, Jack, Tanner, Travis, Hanli, all of them armed to the teeth. "Ready?"

Heads nodded, murmurs of affirmation rippling through the room.

Darien slid the last of his guns into his weapons belt. His phone was buzzing with an incoming call, but when he saw the name displayed on the screen—FINN SOLACE—he ignored it.

"Motherfucker," Darien muttered.

The phone rang again, and when he still didn't answer, messages started coming through, the separate buzzes chasing each other so swiftly they were practically one long vibration.

Darien swore. He unlocked the screen and checked the messages, making sure it wasn't Loren trying to contact him, or any news having to do with her—

Finn's message read, *ANSWER YOUR PHONE RIGHT NOW.*

Another call came through.

Darien swung open the front door and walked out into the cool night, the others following on his heels. He didn't have time to waste.

He didn't slow his pace as he swiped his thumb across the screen and answered the call. "Finn—"

"I fucked up."

"Yeah, you fucked up a lot, you want to know why? Because you're the new Head Detective, you lying shit."

“We can talk about that another time, but I need—”

“I’m fucking done with you—”

Finn’s next words were rapid shouts that knifed into his ear.

“*Darien, GAVEN’S COMING AFTER YOU!*”

Behind him, Ivy whispered, “Darien,” at the same time that Travis said, voice hollow, “Oh shit.”

Darien looked up, across the yard—at the silhouetted figures standing on the other side of the wrought—iron gate.

Gaven fucking Payne and his men.

“Heard you’ve been playing me for a fool.” Though Gaven spoke quietly, his words were clear, each one picked up by the sharp hearing of the hellsehers standing on the front steps of Hell’s Gate, staring down the threat out front of the property.

Everyone was out here. Everyone but Ivy, who Darien had seen slip away the moment he’d walked out here to find Gaven on the other side of the gate.

“The fuck are you talking about?” Darien said.

“You’re trying to put my men and I behind bars.”

Darien stood at the front of the group. The passing of time was too swift, the moon now a giant red orb climbing above the city, its glow painting everything in sight blood-red.

“You’ve been working with the imperator,” Darien said. “Haven’t you?” Gaven had been supplying Quinton Lucent with the aura magic needed to kill the demons and open the Veil. It was possible that he wasn’t the one directly siphoning the aura magic, but he had a hand in trafficking it.

“Only took you long enough to figure it out,” Gaven said. A cold smile flickered across his face. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Darien. And, you know, keeping you busy.”

“What do you want, Gaven?” Darien was tired of pissing time away while Loren was being dragged into Spirit Terra. He had to get by these guys, had to get to her—

Gaven gave a cold smile. “I’ve come to see you bleed.”

The obsidian of the Sight engulfed Gaven’s eyes. The rallying of his magic was swift, and—

And visible.

Clouds of deep violet materialized out of thin air as Gaven swept his arms out at his sides, fingers spreading wide, nostrils flaring. Bolts of gold and lilac lightning flashed inside the wall of his magic.

The Aether.

Darien didn’t—*wouldn’t* wait any longer.

He threw his own magic out in a dark wave that swept like a crackling storm across the yard, swallowing everything in its path. The magic spells protecting the property, knowing the power belonged to him, yielded.

The world went quiet as Darien’s power struck Gaven and his men.

Darien winced, boots sliding back—just a little—as his magic connected with the storm of Gaven’s Aether. Nostrils flaring, hands twitching at his sides, Darien shoved his magic out—

With a guttural roar that shook the windows in Hell’s Gate, Darien’s magic erupted.

Bodies and vehicles went flying. Metal and glass crunched as those vehicles connected with the invisible spells covering the neighbours’ houses. Magic sputtered, electric lines zipping up and out. The smell of candle smoke seared the air.

And then Ivy was ripping Lace’s car out of the garage, the door barely opening for her on time. She screeched to a halt near the front steps.

Darien got in, the others following.

“Hold on,” Ivy gritted out. She stepped on the accelerator, gravel flying as she sped for the gates.

The spells softened at her approach, those gates swinging open right on time.

She cranked the steering wheel to the left, tires screeching as she sped past the destroyed cars, rolling over several of Gaven’s dead men.

In the side mirror, Darien watched the house disappear, the gates swinging shut again.

Watched Gaven stagger to his feet, several of his men doing the same, hands pressed to bloody foreheads and broken noses.

Darien knew it wouldn’t be the last time he’d see the prick, but he had bigger things to worry about tonight.

## PART V

### A HAIL OF FIRE



Loren woke up to a gray sky shot through with bolts of lilac and a watercolor wash of violet clouds. The ground beneath her was rumbling and cold, and a breeze that smelled of sulphur and corpse flowers swept across her face, sending her hair tumbling across it.

One more blink, and she took note of the figure crouching at her side. A male, his face blurry. He was wearing the clothes her father had been wearing at the school.

Not her father.

It was Johnathon Kyle.

They had never been in the same room. That day Loren had gone into the tunnels to find her father standing by the doorway into Spirit...

Johnathon Kyle had not been there that day.

Loren jolted and tried to sit up, but her hands and feet were bound with rope. She wore the white bodysuit, thick material groaning as she tried to fight, to wriggle free.

Johnathon gave her a cold smile. "There's no use in struggling," he said. "It'll be over soon."

"What did you do to my dad?" Loren snarled, pulling against the restraints. "To Cyra? *Where are they?*"

"You've figured it out, have you? Only took you long enough."

"Where are they?" she repeated.

"They're safe. For now." The wicked glint in his eyes had her glancing around, only to realize that they weren't alone.

The imperator and his men surrounded them, guns at the ready, watching and waiting. For what, she wasn't sure. Klay was here too, but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were downcast, but she sensed he was afraid. Again, she wasn't sure why, but it made her own blood run cold.

And then that chill in her blood turned to solid ice as she took in her surroundings.

They had carried her deep into Spirit Terra. As deep as the last

time she'd walked this soil. Several feet away from where the group was stationed was a curtain—the very same curtain the Shucca had burst through.

The massive black wall was like a river of souls. Skull-like faces with hollowed-out eyes and gaping mouths swam in the darkness, barely visible until flashes of green lightning illuminated their haunting features. There was no light in there. There was only evil.

Death.

Loren swallowed bile. “What do you want?”

“I need you to take down this veil, Calla,” the imperator said, stepping closer. “Take it down, and we won’t kill you or your friends.”

“This is the Void,” Loren said, gesturing with her bound hands to the realm that lay beyond the thick wall of shadow. “This is the Void, and if I open it—” Her voice stuck in her throat as she saw movement on the other side of the barrier.

Something was prowling the border. Sensing them. Waiting for the chance to strike.

More Shucca. Or perhaps something worse.

“Do it, Loren,” Johnathon said. “Lower it, and your Devils will be spared. You have our word.”

Loren’s mouth was dry, her heart a flurry of painful beats. If she could take this suit off, if she could use her magic—

“Don’t even think about it,” the imperator said, his cold gaze narrowing in on her right hand that was inching toward her left—toward the ring she only had to turn clockwise to take off. The imperator held up the trigger for the built-in taser. “Let your next move be a smart one, Miss Calla.” The threat was what she needed, because the imperator had just revealed to her that the trigger was on his person.

“Cut me free,” she said, gesturing to her tied hands. “Cut me free and I will do whatever you ask.” Swallowing, she added, “As long as you spare my friends.”

Johnathon took a knife out of his pocket, flipped it open, and cut through the rope around her wrists. Her ankles.

Kicking off the rope and pulling her hands free, Loren pushed to her feet and stepped up to the pillar. Blood rushed to her head, making it spin. There was a warm spot on her forearm that told her the tattoo was glowing. Blue, by the feel of it. Blue was better than red.

The closer she got to the pillar, the more horrible she felt, as if the whole thing was made of death. Her heartbeat began to slow, and her body felt hollow, as if all the life was being sucked out of her.

When she spoke to Singer down the Spirit Bond, she kept her face blank, her eyes empty of expression. *They don’t know about you, buddy,*

she said.

At least, she hoped they didn't. Prayed with all her might that they didn't. But the emperor had been watching her for a long time, and when he wasn't watching her, he'd had Johnathon watching her, glamourised as her father. Who knew what they had managed to find out? After all, it was probably how they'd discovered Erasmus was still alive. Watching her had given them plenty of answers.

But she refused to think about this, holding firmly onto the only spark of hope she had left, as she said to Singer, *When I bring down this Veil, we need to run, but I need you to get that trigger from the emperor. Can you do that, buddy?*

A phantom paw on her heart was all the answer she needed.

Loren closed her eyes and forced herself to focus. The moment she felt the subtlest of glows coming from her conduit, she splayed her fingers and slapped her hand onto the pillar.

Minutes passed. Around her, the emperor's men began to murmur, asking each other questions, not understanding.

She didn't understand either, but she focused, blocking out the sound of their voices, sweat beading on her forehead.

Magic poured out of her and into the stone, lighting it up. It was dim, and even though the veil rippled and began to thin, it did not come down entirely, just like last time. Something was missing, but—

The creatures on the other side...she could see them now. There were hundreds of them. Maybe even thousands. And the realm—the Void...it was filled with a writhing darkness that seemed tangible, the blackness utterly blinding, not a hint of light to be seen.

"It's not working," Johnathon said. "What's missing?"

The creatures paced by the weakened barrier, testing its strength. Creatures that looked like partially decayed dogs and wolves that had crawled out of the grave, eyes glowing, mouths foaming. Bat-like creatures swarmed the dark sky, lighting it up with trails of green fire generated by pumps of membranous wings. There were horned monsters that stood on two legs, some on four.

All eyes were the deep red of mulberry. If these things got through the wall, they would be heading straight to their world to hunt. To feed.

Loren had just removed her hand from the pillar when the first creature—a hound with green fire rippling out of its mouth—leapt through.

Bullets containing white magic seared the air.

The thing fell in a burst of flames, dying with a final click of its jaws.

But a moment later, half a dozen others were coming through the veil, the strongest of them able to make it through the last of the

magic protecting their group.

With the imperator's men occupied, Loren acted.

*Now!* She bellowed to Singer. And with an outward thrust of both of her arms, and a burst of rainbow magic, she froze everyone where they stood—including the creatures that had dove through the Veil.

Singer barrelled out of her shadow with a bark. Instead of his usual black form, he was white. She didn't know how, but he was white. He hurtled straight for the imperator, who was frozen in the moment, and ripped the trigger out of his grip with sharp teeth.

And then Singer was at her side, and they were running.

Loren knew it wouldn't hold for long. If she didn't get far enough away from here in time, it wouldn't just be the imperator and his men she would have to worry about, but also the demons.

With Singer at her side, the trigger for her suit in his mouth, they ran, banking on Loren's limited memory of this horrible place to find her way back out. Every pulse of the clock in her neck told her that her time was winding down, her life running out.

She did not look to see how many minutes were left.

Darien and the others made it below Angelthene Boulevard just as the forcefield went down, the magic of the anima mundi that forever vibrated through the cristala tower vanishing without a trace. The interference from Spirit Terra—or maybe the Well slumbering inside that realm—had caused it to cut out.

Memories from these past few weeks tripped over themselves in Darien's mind.

The intersection that hadn't worked properly since Kalendae. The clocks in the downtown core that randomly stopped working, even after changing the batteries.

He remembered the last time he'd walked these tunnels, not long before the Well had exploded. How he'd been able to hear Ivador Langdon speaking in his headset, and had wondered, even during all the chaos back then, how it was possible. It was as if the Well had somehow bent reality; had manipulated things it had no right manipulating.

With the absence of the forcefield, the whole city fell silent and still, as if the beating urban heart of Angelthene had been ripped out and thrown far away. The Blood Moon was climbing high above the city; within the hour, demons of all kinds would be stirring awake, not just in Angelthene, but also in the land surrounding it, coaxed out of their dens by the red light to feed.

And they would be heading straight here. Straight into the city, its citizens left unprotected by magic for the first time during a Blood Moon in...ever.

Tanner couldn't bring the forcefield back up. He was typing on his tablet as they navigated the dank underbelly of Angelthene, but the look on his face, and the way he muttered under his breath, told Darien his usual tricks were failing.

This was something different than Kalendae. Something worse.

The tunnels lit up with flares of light as Darien and the others emptied bullets into the bodies of the imperator's men, shots cracking through the tunnels. Their guns were built for efficiency and silence, but down here sound carried, and he knew every shot they fired would alert the other men lurking in the network of passageways. Blood sprayed the cement walls and floor. Corpses tumbled into the water channels, turning the runoff red. There were chunks of ice

floating in that water, and some of the drips from the ceiling had solidified into icicles, the tapered points winking cruelly in the light.

Dead bodies littered the ground, many of them not felled by Darien and the others. Men who worked for the emperor and had been slaughtered by the demons that had already made it through.

When they rounded the bend just past the waterfalls, Darien's mind emptied with shock, his mouth drying out at the sight of the Veil stretching like starry fabric across the far wall.

The thing looked alive. It undulated with a phantom wind, thunder rumbling from deep within the spirit realm.

The men guarding the area spotted them with a shout and raised their weapons.

As the others took down the men guarding the Veil, Darien hurried over to the tables that were pressed up against the left wall, his every movement covered by Travis and Jack.

Darien threw open the briefcases and crates and boxes, searching for the syringes containing the serum of life that would allow him to move through Spirit. He needed it, or he wouldn't be able to enter Spirit and find Loren. Loren, who was stuck in there, *alone*—

Darien's chest tightened, blood thrumming with fear.

None were here. There were no syringes, not a single one.

"No, no, no," he breathed, shaking his head. He refused to believe it. There had to be *one*—just *one*. He searched desperately, throwing things off the table, black crates of bullets containing aura magic rattling as they hit the floor. "No, please. Please, please, please. *Fuck!*" He launched a black crate off the table, where it soared into the wall, bullets flying out of the boxes inside and pinging across the ground.

Ivy and Travis came up behind him, the tunnels now silent as every necessary shot had been fired, the emperor's men lying dead on the ground, scarlet seeping across cement.

"Darien?" Ivy inquired softly.

"They're gone!" he shouted, spinning around, eyes alit with terror that was flattening his lungs. There was no air in here. "The Life Clocks—there's none left!"

Ivy stepped aside as he stalked up to the Veil, walking over dead bodies and smears of blood.

There was no sign of Loren, no sign of anything on the other side but a vast and desolate landscape, the sight rippling from the movement of the torn barrier. It felt like looking through a fishbowl, the sight wavy and distorted, the entrance splitting wider. Particles and little stones and what looked like balls of light and sparks levitated within, the large amount of them obstructing his vision.

Darien lifted a hand...slowly pushed it through the Veil—

The glove of the bodysuit dissolved, followed immediately by his

skin, leaving nothing in its place but bone. A spear of pain ripped through his hand and spread right up to his elbow, causing him to shout out in alarm, the sound carrying far, drawing curse words from the others, who stepped up to see if they could help. He withdrew with a hiss, curling the bones of his fingers into a tight fist.

As fast as it had decayed, his hand returned to normal, the glove of his bodysuit restoring too. The others murmured in question.

The whole city rumbled, the ground shaking under their feet.

Darien looked up with his Sight, seeing through the road, all the way up to the sky, where winged beings shot across a starless canvas like meteors, weapons in hand.

Roark was leading the Fleet. Taking the soldiers to the defense posts surrounding the perimeter of the city.

The demons of their own world were beginning their hunt.

—

Time was moving far too quickly.

Loren's heart raced so fast she could scarcely breathe, and her leg muscles burned like hell as she hurtled through the spirit realm, pushing herself faster than she had ever moved before.

As she ran, she tried to use her magic, tried to melt through surfaces that might lead her back into her world, but her magic was spent, and her conduit did not respond to her pleas. Not a flicker of heat, nor a flash of light. Nothing. There was nothing now that would help her, nothing but her own two feet and her will to survive.

Singer maintained a swift pace beside her, urging her to keep moving, to not slow. Whenever she began to feel bogged down, her limbs stumbling from exhaustion and strain, he would bark, spurring her to keep going. His body was white as snow. It glowed like the brightest star, the edges of his fur shimmering like a rainbow after a heavy storm, the same color shining on his sharp teeth and nails.

There was far too much ground to cover, too much distance between her and the rip in the Veil. If she kept moving at this pace, not slowing for one second, she might stand a chance at slipping through. But it would be tight, and she couldn't falter. There was no room for mistakes, no matter how small. She could feel Death looming, ready to gobble down the last of her life, to drain her soul dry until there was nothing left of her but a husk. Still, she kept moving, running away from death, sprinting straight toward the promise of life.

Two steps later, and something collided with her from the side.

She fell to the ground with a startled cry, rolling several times, the dark purple dust of the Aether kicking up around her in a choking

cloud.

As soon as she stilled, Singer was at her side. He nudged her with worry, teeth gently latching onto the fabric of her bodysuit as he tried to pull her to her feet.

Once Loren had gathered her bearings, and the dust had settled, she looked up to see a gold-eyed wolf standing several feet from her. Saliva glistened on sharp teeth.

Singer stepped in front of her, guarding her. He eased into a defensive crouch, hackles raised, a low growl rumbling up from deep in his chest as he prepared to square off against the wolf.

And then that wolf startled both Loren and Singer as it became a woman. A Warg. The animal Loren had been looking at a moment ago was now nothing but a pelt thrown across delicate shoulders. The woman had a blunt cut of strawberry-blonde hair that swayed from the shift, revealing the area below her right ear, where a crescent moon used to glow. Now, that area was unmarked, but there was a clock slightly farther down her neck, the numbers ticking away on her skin.

Two hours, which was nearly an hour longer than Loren had.

Valary Sternberg smiled. "Hello, Loren."

—

Darien heard Max's voice bouncing through the tunnels behind him.

Turning his back on the door into Spirit, Darien pushed through the others, who stepped away to let him pass, and met Max by the waterfalls. Conrad, Erasmus, Cyra, and Dallas were with him, and following a short distance behind their group were Lace and Arthur.

Arthur waved at him with a hand that held three long shards of black adamant, the weapons wrapped up in a towel. "It's rough work, but I did my best!" he called.

Darien waved him by. "Give them to the others."

Lace and Conrad followed Arthur. As Lace passed Darien, she gave him his keys.

Darien stepped in Erasmus's path, blocking him from walking by. "I need you to tell me how to seal it. The Veil."

Erasmus said nothing.

"Well?" Darien snapped. His heart was pounding. He couldn't stop thinking about Loren; could barely breathe at the thought of her being stuck in Spirit Terra—by herself, for god's sake. He had to believe that she would make it. He had to believe she would find a way out. Only once she was safe would he shut the Veil, fixing this mess once and for all.

Erasmus still said nothing.



“You going to say something or what?” Darien barked, voice echoing sharply, even over the noisy rushing of the waterfalls. “I know you have answers, quit holding out on me.”

Cyra stepped forward. “He can’t—” She abruptly stopped talking.

“Can’t what?” Darien pressed. “Can’t what?” He faced Erasmus again, nostrils flaring. “Can’t speak? *You can’t speak?*”

He started to shake his head, but stopped partway through the movement, looking pained.

Darien turned his upper body, pointing a finger at the rip into Spirit Terra. “Your daughter is trapped in there. She can’t get out. She can’t get out, and I can’t get to her because all the Life Clocks are gone.” He grabbed a fistful of Erasmus’s shirt collar. “*This—*” He pointed again at the writhing doorway, then jabbed Erasmus in the chest with two fingers, hard enough to send him rocking back on his heels. “*Your* fault. This is your fault.” He pulled him closer. Spat in his face, “*Useless*. I don’t care that you’re my girlfriend’s dad. You’re useless!”

He shoved him away and whipped his car keys at his face. Erasmus barely caught them before they could cut up his nose.

Darien said, “Go sit in my car and don’t touch anything.”

Then he faced the others, who were watching near the shimmering gate. “We’re going to have to figure this out on our own.” He looked at Max. “Go with Dallas to her house. See if you can find the other Moonstone. See if you can get a hold of Roark or Taega.”

Cyra cut in. “They don’t know anything. It was why Erasmus gave it to them. Years ago. To figure—” Her throat bobbed.

The blood in Darien’s veins was scalding. “To figure it out?” he said, concluding her sentence. He gave a cold, disbelieving laugh. He shot a glare at Erasmus, who dipped his head under the scrutiny. “Another of your bullshit riddles?” he seethed.

Max stepped forward. “We’ll go. We’ll figure it out, Dare. I’m sure they know *something*.”

“Take Arthur with you,” Darien said. “Get him home safely.” He pointed at Erasmus. “My car. *Now*.”

Cyra said, “I’ll go with Max.”

“I don’t give a shit what you do.” Darien turned and headed back to the Veil. He called to Max, “Hurry.”

—

Loren staggered to her feet. “What are you doing here?”

Valary wore a cold smile. “I’ve been keeping an eye on you ever since I heard the rumors. Ever since I heard how *special* you are. The first human in history to possess magic.” Those lips pulled back over

her teeth. "I decided to follow you here tonight. I beat Darien and the others to the tunnels and took away their chances of finding you."

The Life Clocks. She must have destroyed them, or perhaps hidden them. The thought gutted Loren, and suddenly the timer on her neck felt like an aching bruise, a reminder that her life was winding down, and there was no way to stop it, no one to help her. And now, with this Warg in her way—

She refused to finish her thought.

Loren's eyes found the timer on Valary's neck again. The minutes were ticking down, every second too precious to waste. "Valary," she tried, keeping her tone calm. Pacifying. "You don't have much more time than I do. We need to get out of here—"

"You're not leaving this place alive, Loren." She nudged her wolf pelt with a sharp nail. "See this? I had to steal it. Your boyfriend got me excommunicated after you tattled to him about our little altercation at Hell's Gate." She stepped to the side, and Loren mirrored the movement, angling her body the way Valary was angling hers. "Now, because of you, I have nothing. No home. No job. No circle." She bared her teeth, cold eyes assessing Loren from her head to her toes. "You wrecked my life, you little bitch."

"You were the one who trespassed, Valary," Loren said, working to keep her tone steady. "You had no right to be in our house." A sharp twinge in her neck told her that her time was running out.

She was down to her last hour now.

"*Your* house?" Valary sneered, eyes flashing gold. "You're a pathetic human with no place among Darkslayers." Her teeth sharpened and elongated before Loren's eyes, the tips of them catching the strange light in the realm. "I hope you said goodbye to your Devil, because you won't get another chance to."

With a blinding flash of light, Valary shifted into a wolf and dove for Loren with a snarl.

Loren ducked and rolled, rocks and stray branches ripping into her, the blows softened by the bodysuit.

Valary spun and swept for her again. The Warg was upon her before she could retreat, teeth digging into Loren's forearm. It was the suit alone that kept her skin from being ripped to bloody shreds, but Valary would not let go, teeth digging in deep.

"Get off me!" Loren bellowed. She fell back onto the ground, planted a boot on Valary's chest, and pushed her off. Teeth tore from the fabric, and Valary rolled.

Before Valary had a chance to right herself and attack, Loren was up off the ground and sprinting in the opposite direction, making a beeline straight for the bruise in the Veil. Loren swore she could see it from here, glimmering way off in the distance, a curtain of starlit

velvet. Her breath tore apart her lungs like jagged shards of glass, but she did not slow, not even when she sensed Valary gaining on her with bated breath, claws audibly digging into the soil with a strength and speed that had Loren's blood vibrating with fear.

There was a shift in the air that alerted Loren to Valary's next attack.

She braced herself for it—

And ducked just as Valary was leaping for the back of her neck.

Just as she'd hoped, Valary missed her mark. She hit the ground and rolled, turning back into a hellseher in the same second. The shift was fluid and graceful, and soon her gloved hand was reaching for the gun that was strapped to her hip. Those eyes were still gleaming with the gold that lingered from her shift as she spun around to face Loren, snapping the safety off the gun. Lightning-fast, she aimed—

But Loren was already moving. With a battle cry, she jumped on Valary, pinning her shoulders down with her knees. She ripped the gun out of Valary's grip and struck her in the temple with it.

Before Loren could deal out another blow that might've rendered the Warg unconscious, Valary was bucking her hips, throwing Loren off.

Loren lost her balance and fell back with a shout.

Valary was upon her then, her fist connecting with her lips, knees pinning her shoulders in place. "You're a useless, half-life coward," Valary spat. Her fist lashed out again, this time connecting with Loren's nose. "That house was supposed to be mine." She tasted blood, and she could smell it too. It ran down the back of her throat, gagging her. Choking her. "Hell's Gate was supposed to be *my* house." Of course she would want to cash in on Darien's money. His possessions. Everything Darien had to offer, she wanted.

Too damn bad.

Loren hit the Warg back, hard enough to make her nose gush blood like a fountain. It dripped onto Loren's neck, sliding over the numbers glowing on her skin.

"You need to get over yourself," Loren panted, striking her again with an uppercut to the chin, the force rattling the Warg's teeth. "I never did anything to you, Valary. It's your own bruised ego that you can't handle." Red stained the white glove of her bodysuit and misted the air, eliciting hungry cries from starved creatures far away.

They were no longer alone.

With a cry of determination, she pushed Valary off, sending her sprawling across the ground.

The Warg's surprise was an opportunity Loren did not allow to slip away. Pushing herself up off the ground and into a crouch, she got on top of Valary and hit her, again and again, her knuckles cushioned by

the glove, allowing her to strike more times than she would've been able to without it.

"He's not available," Loren hissed, hitting her again, bloodying up her mouth. "And he's never going to be." Valary fell back into the dirt with every strike, unable to even lift her head.

Valary's eyes were wheeling, glazing over with the threat of blacking out, when something caught Loren's eye.

A mass of night-dark fog was descending upon them, coming straight from the wall that separated the Aether from the Void. It was a blanket of swift-falling night that stretched on farther than her mortal eyes could see, as if it were swallowing all of Spirit Terra. But it wasn't the fog that rendered her immobile, her fist frozen in the air above Valary, her lungs unable to draw a breath.

It was what she saw lurking in the darkness. There were eyes and heads and teeth and...

And she swore those were *people* she was seeing in the darkness. Sentient beings walking toward her and Valary, their gaits fluid and predatory. Their bodies suggested they were human, but there was something about them that told Loren they were not. Something about them that told her she had to get away from here, and quickly.

Especially when she heard a series of ravenous, wailing cries ripple out from deep in the fog.

Loren pushed off Valary and ran, taking the gun with her. A part of her begged her to return, to be the bigger person and help Valary get up, to get the Warg away from whatever was living in that darkness before it had a chance to consume her.

But she kept running, knowing she wouldn't stand a chance even if she wanted to try. She did not slow, not even when she sensed the darkness spreading, latching onto every bit of light in the area and lapping it up.

Not even when her surroundings visibly darkened, as if a storm was sweeping in. Thunder rumbled overhead, and every plant in sight seemed to shrink away from the noise, away from the darkness that was growing, seeping into the landscape like a spreading sickness.

Not even when she looked over her shoulder and saw the darkness writhing overtop of Valary's body.

Not even when she saw Valary attempting to drag herself away from it, blood dripping from her mouth and nose, fingers desperately clawing the ground, nails breaking from the effort to pull her body away.

Not even when she heard Valary scream. A bloodcurdling sound that iced Loren's blood and pierced her heart with a terror that was nearly debilitating.

Two seconds later, and that scream was silenced, choked off by a

darkness unlike anything Loren had ever seen, leaving nothing behind of Valary but the faint echo of the very last scream she would ever utter tearing out across the land.

And then it was just Loren. Just Loren, Singer, and her own rasping breaths as she ran like hell for the way out.

---

“What the fuck is that?” Jack murmured.

Creatures were amassing beyond the Veil. There were hundreds of them, the assortment of eyes all glowing red like rubies as they crept closer. Among them were humanoid beings, shadowy figures that traveled in a black fog way off in the distance, their silhouettes barely visible from here, even with a hellseher’s sight.

Darien didn’t want to know what those were.

What chilled his blood worse than the demons were the odds of getting past them. Not him, but Loren. If she had enough time to get back to this gate, she would need to get through all those demons, a potentially greater obstacle than the race against time.

“What do we do?” Lace whispered. When he didn’t answer, she prodded gently, “Darien?”

Everyone was staring at him. Looking at him for the answer. For instructions.

“Don’t let them through,” he said. “Whatever you do, do not let a single one get past you.” He turned to face the Devils. The Angels. His friends. “If we let them through, Angelthene will fall.”

He drew a gun of his own this time, knowing full well that it would do shit against most—if not all—of the creatures that were approaching. But he would exhaust every weapon in the area until...

Wait a minute.

Darien holstered his gun again. He spun around and hurried over to the tables, where the boxes of ammunition—the bullets that were filled with aura magic—were stacked in black crates. Grabbing one of the unmarked boxes that contained bullets of all different shades, he stalked up to one of the emperor’s dead men.

He pried the gun out of the man’s stiff grip and hoisted it up, teaching himself how the weapon worked as quickly as he could. The location and type of trigger the firearm had, where the safety was located, how it felt in his grip. It was a heavy thing, and it took him a second to find the cartridge. When he did, he snapped it open and quickly filled up the remaining slots with bullets from the box he’d grabbed, making sure there was at least one of every color before he slapped it shut and discarded the empty box on the floor.

When he was finished, he motioned for his family and friends to

come closer. "These bullets contain aura magic. You can switch between the colors here." He showed them the latch on the gun—a bolt that allowed for switching between bullets, the magic visible through the glass casing. "See? Understand?"

He was met with murmurs and nods, a few of them uncertain and fearful, but he knew these people better than anyone. They would never back down when presented with a challenge. Roark and the Fleet might be guarding the city at the posts around Angelthene, but these people right here were better than any army.

Darien waved a hand at the dead bodies lying around them, weapons discarded on the ground, a few still frozen in dead hands. "Grab one and get ready."

He'd barely finished speaking before a head-splitting growl that curdled his blood ripped through the air, the sound coming from somewhere within Spirit Terra, not far from this gate.

Another demon like the one at Angelthene Academy. Just like the one he'd struggled to kill at the carnival.

The others were moving, following his instructions without delay, grabbing weapons and filling cartridges with aura ammunition.

Time was running out. Not just for them, but also for Loren, who Darien still couldn't spot in that gods-awful realm.

With the Blood Moon emitting its hunting call, and the demons approaching the gate into their world, Darien wasn't sure whose clock would run out faster.

In the Bright Penthouse, the whole place dark save a couple lamps Roark and Taega had left on, Max and the others dug around through drawers and cupboards, searching for the second Moonstone.

Max moved quickly. He lifted up furniture and threw aside cushions, utilizing his Sight the whole time to see if there was anything hiding under floorboards or behind the many expensive paintings adorning the walls. They'd hoped Roark or Taega would be here when they arrived, but they'd had no such luck, the general of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet currently stationed at one of the posts around the perimeter of the city, designed for use should the forcefield fail during a night like tonight. As for Taega, Max assumed she was with her husband.

Far too much time was passing, and they couldn't find the stone.

Outside, through the floor-to-ceiling windows that spanned the south wall of the living room, Max could see the last of the Fleet soldiers heading to their posts. They streaked by in a sky void of stars, white wings gleaming, various weapons—guns, blades, crossbows—glimmering at their sides. The Blood Moon was high, a full sphere bathing the whole city in a supernatural, carmine light.

Dallas rushed up to him, sneakers slapping on the floors, wings rustling. "I checked the safe," she panted. "There's nothing in there, I can't find it!"

Dominic, Blue, and Cyra joined them, all three looking as defeated as Max and Dallas.

"No luck," Dominic said. "Do you think Roark has it on him?"

Before anyone could reply, a voice cut through the room. "I wasn't aware that we were making a habit of meeting in my house when the city is under attack."

Max turned to see Taega standing in the open doorway, arms crossed, wings rustling with irritation.

Dallas took a wary step forward. "Mom, *please*. We know that you and dad have the other Moonstone. We need it. Please."

Taega tightened her crossed arms, her disbelieving gaze flicking throughout the group. Her attention lingered on Blue, followed by Cyra, who she looked at a moment longer, her eyes tightening. Then she said, "Explain."

Max was the one who answered. "The Veil has been damaged. The imperator has managed to fully open a doorway into the spirit realm,

and we need the stones so we can seal it again. The Blood Moon is calling out to not just the creatures in our world, but also the ones in Spirit Terra. They are trying to push through, and if we don't stop them on time—"

"Is this why the forcefield is down?" Taega asked.

"Yes." And if they didn't hurry, all power in the city would likely go out too, stripping all of Angelthene's streets and buildings of spell protection, which was the only thing currently keeping the citizens safe, the power outage that'd happened earlier only having affected Angelthene Academy, likely courtesy of the emperor. And not only would it strip the buildings of protection, but all the cars would stop working too. No one would be able to leave this city. No one would be able to call for help. Radios might work, if they were lucky, but every mobile phone in the city would become useless.

Taega studied them for a minute. The room was filled with frantic heartbeats, Taega's among them. Her eyes flicked to the windows at Max's back. He wasn't sure what she saw, wasn't sure what conclusion she'd drawn, but she was walking then, heading to the master bedroom down the hallway to her right.

She emerged a minute later with the Moonstone in her fist. Who knew where the hell that had been hiding, but they had done a really good job of keeping it from being found.

Taega stepped up to Max, who held out his hand. She placed the Moonstone in his palm and curled his fingers into a fist. "Seal that fucking Veil," Taega said, her voice low, eyes boring into Max's. "If you fail, our world will not stand a chance."

Max hated both Roark and Taega equally, but damn could they pull through when they were needed the most.

Taega faced her daughter. Dallas stiffened under her mother's sudden inspection, her chin slightly trembling as she lifted it.

"I have to get to your father," Taega said. "Stay safe. Do your family proud." She passed by Dallas without another word, reaching out toward her cheek as if to touch her.

She didn't.

—

The way out of Spirit Terra was close, but still too far.

Loren had been running for so long that her legs wobbled like jelly, and she had sucked down so many gasping breaths that her lungs felt stretched out and flaming hot. Still, she kept going, eyes watering as wind tore at them from the speed at which she was moving.

About a dozen feet ahead, a petite black shape appeared out of nowhere. It took her a while to recognize him, the little figure so tiny



the top of his fiery head barely reached halfway up her calf. Red eyes were watching her with concern, and webbed hands were waving frantically through the air as he attempted to direct her.

“Mortifer.” The Hob’s name left her lips on a shaky breath.

He waved her toward a massive, gnarled tree nearby, where a giant mouth in the trunk of it led down into the ground. Loren did not slow as she followed Mortifer to the tree. The mouth was lined with jagged pieces of wood that looked like sharp teeth. Inside was a swirling, velvety black indicating that a piece of the curtain that separated worlds lay within.

Loren wasted no time in climbing into the mouth of the tree and slipping into the curtain of the in-between. Tiny rainbow sparkles floated around her, bright against the black. Her blood vibrated, and her brain rattled in her skull as she adjusted to the feel of it, her limbs turning weightless as she slipped, down and down, sliding through the Divide like melted butter.

The adjustment came quickly, and the return of her vision was welcome as her surroundings solidified and she found herself standing in that dark barrier, the darkness swirling around her, those tiny stars and galaxies drawn to her skin like static electricity.

Mortifer appeared a moment later, and she followed him through the Veil, keeping up with his pace at a sprint. Her heart was slamming in her chest, and she was painfully aware of the passing of every second marked by her heart beats. She tried to ignore it, but it was like a drumbeat counting down the time she had left, and there wasn’t much of it. Still, she kept going, every muscle in her body shrieking in defiance as she pushed herself, faster and faster, hoping Mortifer had a shortcut that would save her from the clock on her neck.

It was a funny thing, the Life Clock. She’d always thought of her tattoo much the same way, a health problem that would eventually get the better of her. What she wouldn’t give to go back to having only one symbol glowing on her body.

It felt like an eternity had passed by the time Mortifer led the way to another entrance into Spirit. It *was* a shortcut, and it brought her out not far from the rip in the Veil.

But she was still in Spirit, unable to get into her world.

In the distance, she could see it—the weak area in the shimmering wall below Angelthene.

The only question was how much time she had left to get there, but she wasn’t willing to look at the clock and check.

So, she started running again.

Mortifer kept pace with her and Singer, the two of them moving surprisingly fast. Demons were swarming the area, and they turned to look at her, baring their teeth, as she ran, but she didn’t slow. She

didn't meet any of their eyes, praying they would show no interest in her. They seemed mesmerized by something—by the Blood Moon, she realized.

The time left on her Life Clock kept winding down, each second that was gulped up by Spirit pulsing through the skin on her arm, like a second heartbeat.

Ten seconds. Thud-thud.

Nine seconds. Thud-thud.

Eight seconds. Thud-thud.

She kept running, pushing herself toward the Veil. Not once did she tear her eyes from the flickering curtain and the figures she could see waiting on the other side of it. Waiting for her.

Her family. The people who'd brought meaning to her life and had taught her what true love was.

Mortifer kept urging her forward, spurring her to move faster. She was already going as quickly as her legs could take her, her muscles threatening to give out. But it wasn't fast enough.

She was about a dozen feet away from the Veil when the numbers on her neck ran out and dimmed.

---

Darien couldn't take it. He couldn't stand to watch helplessly from behind the Veil as Loren ran for her precious life toward it.

He used to believe he knew what it felt like to be trapped, but this gave the word a whole new meaning as he was forced to watch the woman he loved race against a clock that was winding down to her death. And he was fucking stuck here, unable to get to her, unable to cross over this wretched divide and *help* her, gods-damnit.

"Please." The word was whispered on a shaky breath. Sweat ran down his temples, his back, his sides. There was a twist in his stomach, and a frantic beating in his chest that wouldn't slow. "Please, sweetheart, please. Please, please, please. Keep going. Keep going. *Keep going.*" He paid no mind to the demons that crossed through the Veil, ended by his Devils and Angels, who shot them down before their claws could touch ground. There were already so many bodies, there was hardly anywhere in the area to stand. The ground was soaked with blood, the air thick with the metallic stench of it.

Darien kept watching Loren, never taking his eyes off her, not for a second. He could see the numbers displayed on her neck from here. The angle and his sharp eyesight made them impossible to miss, but he wished he couldn't see them. The only thing his sight managed to accomplish tonight was feeding him a truth he couldn't bear to swallow.

There wasn't enough time. She didn't have enough time—

Seven...

Six...

"Come on." His hands curled into fists at his sides, his gun hanging from the strap on his shoulder as he focused on nothing but Loren. She ran and ran and ran, pushing her legs with all her might. She was close but still too far. He found his boots inching toward the Veil, barely a foot separating him from death. If she died, he would die too. Would follow her into the afterlife, and leave this world behind.

"Come on."

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

"Please," Darien begged, the word a sob. There was a stinging in his eyes, and his vision filled with moisture. "Don't take her from me, don't take her from me. Don't fucking take her from me. *Please.*"

One...

The timer stopped, the glowing numbers on Loren's neck sinking into her skin, not a hint of blue light left behind.

Every thought in Darien's head evaporated, and he felt his heart crack in two, a sharp split that nearly pushed him to his knees, an out-of-body sense of dread turning his head weightless, his limbs boneless. He stared...not blinking, the pieces of his shattered heart racing in his chest, his stomach a knot of nerves that made him want to throw up—

Loren was still running. Still breathing. Her heart was pounding out a rhythm that reached his ears from all the way over here. Even from this distance, he could hear it, as loud and clear as the sound of her feet striking the soil, and it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

It was a miracle. It was a goddamn miracle.

That soil glowed every time her feet touched ground. Red, then orange, then yellow, then green—every color of the rainbow as she ran like hell for the curtain, Singer glowing white at her side, Mortifer clinging to her ankle. It took every bit of strength he had left not to fall to his knees at the sight of this...this *blessing*. This answered prayer.

And just like that, she was through.

She threw herself through the Veil with a sob, and Darien didn't care how it was possible that she was still alive as he caught her mid-jump, rocking back on his heels as she launched her full weight at him.

"I'm alive," she was saying, again and again, her face buried against his shoulder. She beat him to it; she was alive. "I love you,

Darien. I love you, I love you, *I love you.*”

She was alive.

---

The numbers were gone, but she was still running, the ground glowing beneath her feet with every step. Loren wasn't sure how it was possible, but she didn't care, because she was so close that she could see Darien's handsome face right on the other side of the wall.

He was waiting for her. And even if she dropped dead on the other side of the Veil, at least she would get to be held by him one more time. It was all she wanted.

As she neared the Veil, hurtling past the demons that were heading for the gate, entirely oblivious to her presence, as if she were as dead as the spirits who crossed from the land of the living into this realm of endless sleep, she remembered the words of the Widow.

*You can move as if you are a part of both sides of one coin, the Widow had told her. You belong neither here nor there, just as she had no real place in the universe, no true home, one foot in life and the other in death. She was the key, the turning of metal that split two worlds, and she has passed that responsibility onto you. You are the only child born directly from the prima materia in its purest form, therefore the universe and all things in it recognize you as belonging to them. You are the prima materia, therefore you can manipulate it, become it, make it anything you want.*

Loren might not have known her mother, her past shrouded in shadows so heavy she wondered if they would ever clear. But in that moment, she knew that her mother had left her a great many gifts. Just like her mother, Loren had one foot in life and the other in death. She belonged neither here nor there, and while the thought of that frightened her, she didn't allow it to slow or weaken her. Instead, she used it for fuel, pushing her aching legs faster as she closed the last of the distance that stood between her and the Veil—between her and her family—and launched herself right into Darien's waiting arms.

He caught her, just like he'd promised, his strong arms closing around her waist.

“I'm alive.” She repeated the two words, again and again, as she buried her face against his shoulder, greedily breathing in the scent of him. A sob tore out of her rattling chest, and Darien echoed it with one of his own, gripping her tightly but not tight enough, fingers curling in her hair. “I love you, Darien. I love you, I love you, *I love you.*”

Darien held her for a long time as shots were fired around them, aura magic bathing the tunnels with many hues, like light refracting off a prism. Blood misted the air, but neither of them were fazed, their

world consisting of nothing but the two of them, their thundering hearts blending into one song as they clung to each other, breathing in each other's scent as if they couldn't get enough. The insides of Loren's eyelids lit up like fireworks as shots cracked through the tunnels.

Loren was utterly spent, every limb trembling from a crippling mixture of relief and exhaustion. Darien did not put her down, his arms never tiring as he held onto her, gripping her to his hard body, stealing this moment to simply breathe her in—to just *exist* with her.

And then Travis was calling out to him. "Darien, we're down to the last crate!"

For the first time in minutes, Loren lifted her heavy head off Darien's shoulder. She looked around at her family and friends, who kept firing different colored bullets, demons of all breeds sliding past in smears of blood. "What's going on?" she asked.

"There's not enough ammo," Darien replied, his voice tense. He set her on her feet, but kept his arms around her, still supporting most of her weight. The others were fighting for energy, their faces streaked with dirt and blood. "We're going to have to use our magic."

Lace fired another shot, downing one of the wolf-like demons that dove through the Veil. "We don't know how to do that," she panted, wiping sweat off her brow with the back of her hand, her eyes alit with fear. "*You* could barely do it at the carnival."

"We're going to have to try," Darien said.

That was when Loren's legs gave out. She sagged against Darien, her full weight barely transferring to his arms before he was scooping her up, hooking her legs around his waist.

"I need to get her away from here," he told the others. "I'll be back in a few minutes, I promise." Shots resumed as a handful of new monsters leapt through the Veil. Growls rent the air, and more blood sprayed. The stormwater runoffs sloshed like deep red ink as bodies tumbled into it.

"Darien, wait," Loren rasped, every breath shallow. There was a hand in her gut, twisting it tight. Her exhaustion had caught up to her with a vengeance, and she thought she might puke. "You can't leave them."

But he was already walking down the tunnel, passing by the waterfalls that left a mist on her clammy skin and made her shiver violently, teeth chattering.

"Your father is in my car," Darien explained as he plunged into the dark tunnels. There were no lights in this area, so she couldn't see him anymore. She could only feel him. Darien added, "Your *real* father."

"He's okay?"

"He's fine. So is Cyra. She went with Max to find the Moonstone."

“Moonstone?”

“Arthur thinks we can seal the gate if we have two of them.” Darien covered distance quickly, and soon the exit was approaching, the streetlights above filtering through the grate in murky streaks. “I need you to wait in the car with your father while we handle this.”

Something clinked against his boot. He kicked it by accident, and it rolled into the wall.

It was a Life Clock. A lone syringe, the teal liquid inside emitting a faint glow.

Darien stooped to pick it up, a muscle twitching in his tight jaw.

Loren knew exactly what he was thinking. Valary had destroyed—or hidden—all the syringes. He hadn’t been able to get into Spirit and help her, but if he’d found this syringe, if he’d seen it before—

Of course Darien would be blaming himself again.

“Darien,” Loren croaked. “I don’t want to leave you—”

“I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“It’s not about that.”

“I swore to myself that I would make you safe again. I was unable to get into the spirit realm to help you, and I wanted to kill myself for it. I’m not letting you get away from me again.”

“Darien—”

“Don’t argue with me, Loren Elizabeth Calla.” He tried to keep his tone teasing as he glanced down at her, a strand of his inky hair shifting out of place, but Loren could see the worry simmering in his eyes. “I love you, sweetheart, but you will not win this fight.” Loren heard the double meaning behind his words.

Deep in her heart, she knew he spoke the truth. But she worried he and the others might not win the fight either.

The elusive magic inside her was quiet and still. It did not stir. It did not glow. It did not even warm her, her body colder than ice with its absence. There was no power left in her, no way for her to help her friends, so she let Darien carry her up to the street, Mortifer still hanging from her ankle, Singer trotting at Darien’s side.

Down the road, at the end of the block, Darien’s car waited like a dark bat, paint shining beneath a streetlight.

A thick wall of fog was rolling through the city, swallowing cars and buildings, plunging the urban sprawl of Angelthene into the eerie and lightless embrace of night. Deep in the Meatpacking District, monsters stirred, hungry baying bouncing through alleys.

As soon as she was in the back with her father, Singer now sitting on the middle seat between them, Darien tried to straighten, but she reached up, grabbing onto him with hands that trembled.

“I need you to promise,” she said, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck and pulling him down to her level. The tears flooding

her eyes made it difficult to see, so she blinked them away, desperate to look upon his stunning face once more, just in case. The LED streetlight gilded his strong jaw, turning his hair into liquid night and his eyes into deep-hued sapphires. "You need to promise me that you're going to be okay."

His throat bobbed with a swallow. "I'll be fine, sweetheart. I always am." He took her face into his large hands, thumbs rubbing that same comforting pattern that she could never get enough of, the feeling making her shiver with short-lived delight, instead of that deep-boned fear that hadn't left her alone for days. "I'll love you through anything and across any distance." He kissed her, long and deep, the heat from his mouth burning into hers in a way that never escaped her notice, not even now. Not even with their world ending. Ending again, so soon after the last time they had just barely saved it. When he broke the kiss, he stayed close, their noses touching, his breath fanning her mouth. "That is my promise to you, and I will keep it."

His attention went to Mortifer, who had clambered up Loren's leg and was now sitting on her knee. "Will you guard this car for me, Morty?" Darien asked. The Hob blinked up at him. "It's a very important job. Think you can handle it?"

The Hob nodded, looking as concerned for Darien as Loren felt.

"Thank you. Love you, buddy." Darien's eyes went to Loren again, and for a moment that didn't last long enough, he studied her features, as if trying to memorize everything about her in this short time they had left. "I love you, Loren." It was a statement. The kind that made the universe go quiet as the words reverberated out into the distance. The kind that made her blood heat up with passion, only to ice over just as quickly, fear turning it to frost. "I'll love you forever."

It wasn't until he'd let go of her and shut the door, disappearing back toward the tunnels, that Loren realized his promise was lacking.

*Through anything and across any distance*, he'd said. She knew Darien well enough to read between his lines, and she knew that *through anything* meant death. The truth hidden behind his carefully chosen words was like a fist cracking through her ribcage and ripping out her heart. Her bloody, still-beating heart.

Darien's promise meant he wasn't sure if he would come back.

—

There were too many of them.

It was by choice that Darien was using his magic more than the others were using theirs.

He stood at the front of the group of Angels and Devils, positioning

himself right at the gaping mouth into Spirit Terra, taking down the swarms of demons that pushed through the rippling divide, ignoring the protests of his family and friends, who tried to step up to his side, only to be held back by his wall of magic. He knew they only wanted to help, but he was the fastest and the strongest with his magic, so this was how tonight would have to go. And fuck, he would gladly die before he let a single person in this room fall.

The shadows of his magic choked the breath out of the demons' lungs before they had a chance to touch ground in the tunnels, their limp bodies falling slack with death in midair. Darien himself barely moved, only twitching his fingers or tilting his head every now and then, his expression hardly changing as he snapped necks, stopped hearts, and cracked skulls wide open, pulpy blood misting the air.

But these creatures that were getting through...they were smaller and easier to kill, just like those batlike ones he'd downed in the Financial District, seconds before totalling Travis's car. And Darien knew from the sounds he could hear vibrating like seismic waves from deeper in the spirit realm that he wouldn't be so lucky soon. Stronger ones would push through, and when they did he wasn't sure if they would make it.

He didn't allow this horrible truth to stop him. His magic was spread out around him, a wall of surging black, lit up throughout with pinholes of color and light that looked almost identical to the entrance into Spirit Terra, almost identical to Mortifer every time the Hob vanished out of sight back at Hell's Gate, only to reappear somewhere else in the house, usually in one of the fireplaces, scaring the shit out of Darien or one of the other Devils.

Darien stared straight ahead with black eyes, not blinking, as he downed the demons, sometimes four or more at a time. The entrance was crowded with piles of dead bodies. Some of the creatures resembled bats, while others resembled wolves or dogs, or a cross between fauns and jackals. His once invisible magic was an unstoppable force of nature as he pushed himself to his limits, fuelled by nothing but sheer determination and the Venom he'd dripped into his eyes.

But, like everything in life, he knew he would soon hit a wall. A dead end that would render his magic useless.

And the night was far from over.

That was when he spotted three demons running straight for the gate, the Blood Moon drawing them here to slaughter, the white scales on their massive bodies catching the light. Three creatures exactly like the one he had barely managed to kill at the carnival.

All the blood in Darien's head drained down to his feet.

Travis stepped up beside him as Darien's magic briefly waned from



his surprise, allowing Trav a chance to get closer than any of them had been able to all night. "Darien."

"I know," Darien gritted out. He rallied his magic, the force of it causing bits of rock to rise up off the ground. The flame inside him was threatening to gutter out.

"I can help," Travis said.

"I can handle it."

"Darien, for fuck's sake, we're *cousins*." Travis's husky voice bounced through the tunnels. Darien was vaguely aware of the others listening, their panting breaths and heartbeats blending together. "I'm not going to stand here and let you get killed!"

Cousins.

*Cousins...*

Darien whirled around to face him. "Your magic. Let me see it."

Travis blinked. "What?"

"*Show me!* Form a wall or something, just show me your fucking magic, Trav! *Hurry.*"

Travis shut his eyes, squeezing them tight with focus. When he reopened them they were black, just like Darien's, though Trav's was devoid of the webbing that came with taking Venom.

Nostrils flared, brow creased, Travis pushed his magic out of his body, building a wall of it with an outward thrust of his right hand.

A wall almost exactly like Darien's. It was visible, though slightly more transparent than Darien's, a three-feet deep barrier of black that curled like mist. Hope kindled within Darien's chest at the sight of it.

Maybe...maybe they could win this thing.

Shadow magic, death magic, the magic of the Void—Darien didn't know what it was, but he didn't care, because Travis had it too.

Darien grabbed the bottle of eyedrops out of the thigh pocket of his bodysuit and tossed them to Trav. "Two drops, one in each eye." He looked back at the gate. The demons were getting closer, tearing up the ground with clawed feet, red light glowing within hollowed-out eye sockets. Was he imagining it, or were they bigger than the one at the carnival? "We're going to have to kill these fuckers."

Ivy tried to ask him something, tried to step up to his side, but he didn't have a chance to hear her, because the monsters were diving through.

The tunnels lit up with bullets and magic as the creatures attacked with a speed that was staggering, but their line of defense wasn't enough to down them.

By the time Darien and Travis had incapacitated one of the three, another had thrown Darien into a wall, its barbed tail lashing through his magic and right into his chest.

He hit the wall with a shout of pain and landed on a table, crates

and boxes and other shit toppling down around him, the front of his bodysuit absolutely shredded by those lethal barbs. The table turned on its side with a groan, and he slid onto the ground with it, winded and blindsided, but thankfully not bleeding. The barbs hadn't reached his skin, but there wasn't much left of the armor that covered his chest, leaving it vulnerable. Another hit, and he would be done for.

Righting himself in a crouch, he looked up to see the others in the cramped space, fighting for their lives against the two demons, the third already stirring awake, not nearly injured enough by his magic, not even with Travis's combined.

That was when the darkness hit. The silence that was somehow deafening. All power went out in the city. The tunnels plunged into a total absence of light, leaving them blind except for their Sight and the faint glow filtering through the entrance into Spirit Terra, barely enough to allow them to see.

The ground below that entrance began to cave in. The walls around it cracked, and debris fell from the high roof, smashing as it hit the floor.

The Veil was falling. If they couldn't find a way to close this gate, if the others didn't get here with the Moonstone in time, they would lose.

Darien twisted the face of his watch and held it up to his mouth, shouting bloody murder for the person he was trying to contact to pick up on the other end, to be *listening*, gods-damnit. The cell service would be down too, no doubt about that, so this was the only way. The only bloody chance he had to fix this—

"Darien, what the fuck?" came a deep voice. "What are we, kids using walkie-talkies again?"

"Malakai, I need help."

Malakai immediately became serious. "What's going on?"

"There's a rip into Spirit Terra under Angelthene Boulevard." He stood, lashing out with his magic, keeping one of the demons from cutting his sister's head right off.

Ivy whirled on a heel to face him, a mixture of fear and shock in her eyes as she stumbled away from the creature, tripping on bodies. The creature's claw strained with the effort to break free of Darien's hold.

Jack caught his wife before she could fall. He pulled her behind him, putting himself between Ivy and the demon.

"Is that what's happening—" Malakai's question barely reached Darien's ears as he lowered his watch from his mouth, concentrating on the problem at hand—on keeping his sister safe from this monster.

With an outward push of his free arm, his magic so wholly spent he now needed to use physical gestures to make it respond to his

instructions, Darien sent the demon back several feet, away from Jack and Ivy. It roared in defiance, the thunderous sound vibrating the network of tunnels, clawed feet gouging the ground.

*“What the hell was that?”* Malakai was shouting.

Darien lifted the watch to his mouth. “I can’t handle all of them—”

“Where are you?” Footfall drifted through the tiny speaker. In the background, Darien heard him barking orders at other Reapers. “Hold on, never mind, I’ll track you. Stay where you are.”

“Hurry.” Darien wasn’t sure if this would work, but it would increase their odds of winning, that was for sure.

Darien and Travis might have the same type of magic, but they weren’t the only ones.

Malakai had it too.

Max and the others had made it out into the palm-lined street in front of Santa Aria Flats, Taega taking off into the sky to join Roark, just as the city's power grid went down.

Vehicles died. Cell phones turned into useless props. Windows went dark, and every streetlight shut off with a pop and a hiss, pools of protective bright light vanishing right before their eyes, shrouding all of Angelthene in shades of gray and black. The silence was thick enough to cut, the lack of the lively atmosphere of the city raising a shiver on the back of Max's neck.

Dominic tipped his head back and scanned the skyline, the buildings barely visible against the dark sky, now that all the lights were gone. "I'm going to have to fly the stone to Darien."

Creatures with membranous wings were picking prey apart in midair, having scooped them up off the streets or pulled them out of unprotected cars to feed. Screams choked the night. With Max's sharp hellseher vision, he could see trails of blood dripping to the sidewalks from way up high. Could see body parts toppling down as the creatures ripped them apart, limb from limb, the sight sickening.

"You can't fly it by yourself!" Dallas argued. "There's too many of them! Even for *you*." She poked Dominic's chest. Dominic, who looked like he was ready to bolt without a care for what it might cost him.

Cyra cut in. "She is right. I believe you *can* make it, Dominic, but not without help." Even the Fleet soldiers were having trouble, some of them being dragged from their posts and ripped apart, hitting the ground seconds later in pieces.

Max was suddenly sweating. His eyes wouldn't focus. He shook his head to clear it, forcing himself to pay attention to the conversation the others were having, the debate and struggle to keep Dominic from bolting. Blue clung to the Angel's arm, begging him—just as Dallas was begging him—not to act rashly and devise a plan.

There was an ache between Max's brows. A sharp pang that made him wince. His eyes watered and burned, as if the whole city was lit up with blinding lights. But it was still dark, not one bulb alit, not a sound in the area with the exception of the voices of his friends, yet he thought he could hear something. A strange noise that was vaguely familiar, but he failed at identifying it, because that horrible keening sound continued, making him shake his head. Rub his ears. Pace the

width of the sidewalk.

Finally, the sound abated. It felt like much more time had passed, but Max had a feeling it was only seconds, possibly not even two whole minutes. Freed from that crippling feeling, he focused again, catching the tail end of his group's discussion.

Dallas and Dominic had determined they would fly the Moonstone to Angelthene Boulevard together when footfall echoed from down the street, near Santa Aria Flats.

Sabrina was heading this way in wolf form, her black fur gleaming like onyx, the glossy strands illumed red by the Blood Moon. Traveling with her was Emilie Croft, soaring several feet above Sabrina. That creepy red light filtered through the expanse of Emilie's leathery wings, casting her murky silhouette across the asphalt.

When Emilie's feet touched ground, she shifted, wings transforming into a long jacket, her body now cloaked in clothes that had been absent a moment ago as her vampiric appearance was replaced with her less terrifying form. This form was more angelic than devilish, her face cherubic, her short hair flaxen and spiky.

Sabrina shifted, black fur dripping off her body like dark rain. It faded into silver sparks that dissipated when they touched ground, leaving her in leggings and a loose shirt.

"Are you guys okay?" Sabrina shouted as she and the vampire closed the rest of the distance and joined them on the sidewalk. "We came as soon as we heard." She was barely winded from the journey here, thanks to the resilience and speed that came with being a werewolf.

Dallas pulled her friend into a quick embrace. "We're okay. My mom gave us the Moonstone."

Sabrina's brows flicked up. "Taega actually cooperated?"

Max offered, "She pulls through when she's needed." His voice sounded weird when he spoke, as if his ears were plugged with water.

"Where's Logan?" Dominic asked.

It was Emilie who answered. "He and Chrysantha went with the best fighters in the pack to the city's perimeter." Something told Max that if Emilie had been given the chance to join Chrys and the wolves, she would've jumped at it.

"We're not sure if Roark will accept the help," Sabrina said, "but Logan is unwilling to stand by and watch." She gazed out at the city, the many buildings of various shapes and sizes, all of them dark. The way her throat bobbed, her almond-shaped eyes tightening with emotion, told Max she feared for Logan, her bond with the alpha likely prohibiting her thoughts from straying from him for long.

With the city drained of all power and spells, they could hear the attacks from here. They were faint, but everyone present had an

immortal's hearing, allowing them to separate the clang of blade against blade from the crack of bullets; the release of a crossbow string from the blasts of magic.

Among those sounds were howls. The feel of Sabrina's aura told Max that not all of those howls were the victorious kind.

Max showed them the Moonstone. "We need to get this to Darien and the others. They're at the entrance into Spirit Terra, and this—" He held it up. "—is our only way of turning that entrance back into a wall."

Dallas's wings flared out, feathers whooshing. "Dominic and I are flying it." Her silver-green eyes met the Angel's icy ones. "Ready?"

Emilie stepped forward. "I'll go with you." She looked skyward, where more of those batlike creatures had gathered several blocks over, swooping down into streets and alleys with a hunger that would be insatiable until the moon set. "I think you could use the extra help."

"We'll follow from below," Max said, gesturing between himself, Sabrina, Blue, and Cyra. "It'll take us longer to get there, but we'll be as quick as we can." They would have buildings and corners obstructing their path, not to mention the countless demons currently swarming the city streets, but Max wouldn't let that stop him.

Dallas walked up to him, wings drooping, the tips of the feathers that made up the longest parts of them sweeping across the sidewalk. "I'm going to need that Moonstone, big guy."

This was goodbye, then. Max could only hope it wouldn't be the last time he would get to look upon her face.

He took Dallas's hand into his and flipped it palm-up. Placing the stone in her hand, he closed her fingers over it, keeping his eyes locked with hers all the while. "This isn't goodbye," he said. "I'll be right behind you, I swear it."

"You'd better be." Dallas drew a deep breath that rattled. "I'm not about to lose the only man I've ever loved." It wasn't a straightforward *I love you*, but it was progress for Dallas, and Max accepted it gladly.

"I feel the same way about you, Dal. Except, you know, you're a woman."

The corner of her mouth quirked. "Very smooth."

"I've never been very good at talking."

"Then kiss me instead."

Max did. It was a long kiss, a deep one. Max never wanted to let her go. Her fingers threaded through his hair, pulling him as close to her as possible.

By the time Max broke the kiss, they were both out of breath. "Go," he told Dallas. "Make your *real* family proud." The family that would

always love her, even if she failed.

Dallas's reluctance to let go of him was tangible, but she did, walking over to join Dominic and Emilie.

The plan was in place. Angelthene Boulevard wasn't far, but getting there would be a task—

There was an explosion way off in the distance, near the freeway that looped around the North End. It was a sound akin to an earthquake, the force of it snapping powerlines and crumbling buildings.

Suddenly, Max couldn't hear. All sound in the area was cut off by a sharp ringing that wormed deep into his skull. He stumbled, the chill of the night shifting into a boiling heat that melted the flesh off his bones.

Blue's eyes went to Max's right hand that was sweating at his side. She mouthed his name and pointed with a blue-tinted nail.

Or maybe she'd shouted his name, but he still couldn't hear. That high-pitched ringing grew to a volume that made his nose bleed. Red dripped to the sidewalk. His brain rattled and swelled, pressing like an expanded balloon against his skull.

He followed Blue's line of sight. Looked down at his hand—

That hand was on fire. On literal *fire*. Flames licked up his wrist, a blue core burning among the red and orange.

"What the fuck!" He shouted out a mess of words even *he* couldn't understand. Words that sounded like a made-up language. "Get it off!" He waved his hand, frantic, desperately trying to put out the flames.

Fire. He was on *fire*.

The others hurried forward to help, mouths forming words he couldn't hear, but he staggered away, swinging and thrashing his arm, panic squishing his heart into pulp.

The flames spread at a rapid speed, and soon his whole sleeve was on fire. The others were still trying to help him, but he couldn't stop panicking.

"Maximus, hold still—"

"It's okay, we're going to get it out—"

"You gotta stop moving, bud—"

Memories of his little sister burning to death in a house fire infiltrated his mind. Drowned out the voices of his friends.

MJ was screaming in his head. Their house was burning. Ashes were jammed up under his nails. The hair had been singed off his face, his head. There was smoke—so much smoke.

He pulled off his jacket and threw it to the sidewalk. He was sweating bullets and he couldn't breathe. The fire kept spreading, not burning but spreading. Taking off his jacket had done nothing, and the fire was traveling up his arm and to his shoulder, heading right for his

face, just like years ago—

And then Blue was there, grabbing onto his arm with small hands, not flinching from the heat. “I can put it out.” She attempted to hold his wild gaze with her own, her hands gripping his arm as tightly as she could, stopping him from pulling away. “Max. Max, it’s okay. It’s okay. *Max!* I can put out the fire.”

“Do it, do it!” Max begged, resisting the urge to wave his arm through the air again. “Please, Blue, I fucking hate fire. *Please.*”

“It’s okay.” Blue held onto his arm and closed her eyes. “It will be okay.” That was the last word he was able to understand.

Because it was Ilevyn that floated off her lips now. Ilevyn that echoed down the street.

Max watched her, desperate for distraction.

Soon there was water rippling from under her palms. It traveled over his arm, moving like a river current. The scent of fresh mountain water flavored with cool pine flooded the area. The temperature of the water was icy, as if it were glacier-fed. Max was still gasping through flared nostrils, his heart beating so hard it hurt. But the temperature was soothing, and the sight of the water kept him from pulling away.

The water traveled up and up, putting out the flames with its cool touch. It moved in a pattern that mimicked ocean waves, the sight of it extinguishing the fear that had rooted itself in Max’s mind. His heart.

Several minutes later, the fire was out, every trace of it gone. The last of Blue’s water magic disappeared into her palms, taking every last effect with it. Max’s shirt sleeve wasn’t even wet.

With the fire now out, and Blue stepping back to give him space, Dallas rushed up to him. “Maximus?” Her eyes were filled with worry, and her hands hovered in the air between them, as if wanting to reach for him, but not wanting to upset him. “Max, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He managed to slow his breathing. “I’m okay.” He faced Blue, wanting to thank her.

But Blue was staring at his wallet that was lying near his phone and keys on the sidewalk, all of them having fallen out of his pockets when he’d thrown his jacket. The contents of his wallet had spilled, banknotes fluttering in a breeze, coins lying on the asphalt.

There was a photograph there, too. The photograph of his sister, the one he’d kept in his wallet since the day she’d died.

Blue bent and carefully picked it up, pinching the bottom-left corner between her thumb and forefinger.

“That’s Maya,” Max said, still catching his breath. It was a school photograph. Maya was smiling at the camera, her hair a mass of red curls framing her heart-shaped face. “My sister.”

Blue straightened from her bent position, her brow creased.



“Scarlet,” she said, pointing at the image.

Now, it was Max’s turn to look confused.

Blue came closer. She held the photograph up beside his head, eyes flicking between his features and the image of his sister. The photograph fluttered in her grip as a breeze tore through the area, carrying with it a medley of smells, the strongest of which were blood and metal.

Blue said, “This is Scarlet.”

“Her name was Maya,” Max said. He glanced at Dallas, who looked just as confused as he felt. Behind them, Dominic exchanged glances with Sabrina and Cyra. Max added, “I called her MJ.”

Blue shook her head. “Scarlet.”

“I don’t understand.”

She pressed a hand over his heart, the frantic beat thumping into her palm. “Inferno,” she whispered. A soft smile spread across her face, and her eyes filled with understanding. There were tears gleaming there, but Max couldn’t tell if they were tears of happiness or sadness. Max’s whole world shook under his feet as Blue said, “I know your sister, Max. I know her as *Scarlet*.”

Know. Not *knew*.

Maya was alive?

MJ was *alive*.

—

The glass of the car window was bitter cold against the skin of Loren’s forehead. Frost crackled across its surface, biting deep into her bone, but she welcomed the feeling. The temperature dulled the hot throbbing in her skull and kept her eyelids from drooping shut.

Her father sat beside her in the back of Darien’s car, staring out at the Blood Moon that was washing the city with crimson light, no forcefield to block it. Soon, these streets would be teeming with bloodthirsty monsters, and with no magic spells over the buildings, countless lives would be lost. Deadbolts and barred windows might deter thieves, but that was where the protection they offered stopped, the creatures of the Blood Moon far too strong to be kept out.

Loren stared at the cristala of the Control Tower a handful of blocks northwest, beyond the Avenue of the Scarlet Star. It was dark and quiet, no more than a useless decoration now.

“Dad,” Loren croaked.

He instantly turned to face her, clasping her cold hand that was resting on the seat between them, his wrinkled fingers warming hers.

Loren tried to swallow, but her throat was dry, even after the three juice boxes she’d gulped down. Since they’d started dating, Darien

always kept juice boxes in the trunk. “What color magic runs through the Control Tower?” she whispered.

“It is not just one color, Loren, it is every c-color. It siphons magic from the anima mundi.” The anima mundi—what she was made out of.

“Mortifer,” Loren said. The Hob looked up at her from where he had slid himself into the pocket in the back of the passenger seat. “I need you to start this car for me. I know you can.”

Erasmus tightened his hold on her hand. “What’s going on, Loren? What are you p-planning?”

“I need to get to the tower.”

He didn’t let go, and soon Mortifer was clambering out of the seat pocket and pulling on her leg, little bleating noises floating from his mouth.

“Loren, I can’t let you do that.” Erasmus’s tone was pleading. “Darien s-said—”

“I don’t care what he said,” she interrupted gently. “I am the only person who can bring the forcefield back up, and if I don’t—”

The ravenous baying and yips of the creatures of the Blood Moon rippled through the night.

They were here. They had made it all the way into the heart of the city, some of them having crept past the Fleet soldiers. There were far too many for the Darkslayers to handle, who were being thrown to the wolves by the powerful demons pushing at the rip into Spirit Terra.

And there was still no sign of Maximus and the others. No sign of the Moonstone that Arthur believed would help them stitch the rip in the Veil shut.

“I’m going,” she said. “Whether you help me or not.”

To her surprise, her father let go of her. Loren felt uneasy at the thought of leaving the only vehicle in the whole city that was protected from outside forces, thanks to Mortifer’s powerful magic, but she had to do something. She had to help them hold the line, or they might not make it through the night.

Erasmus gestured to the front seats. “Better hurry. We don’t have much time.”

Loren got up and shimmied through the front seats, Mortifer hanging from her ankle.

“Have you ever driven a car before?” Erasmus asked.

“A couple times.” Loren grunted as she slid into the driver’s seat. “A few years ago.” She found the lever on the side of the seat and slid it forward and up until it felt comfortable. The thought of Darien trying to get back in his car only to find that he couldn’t fit made her smile.

“Do you want me to drive?”

“Heck no,” she breathed, fingers skimming the steering wheel. “I’ve wanted to drive this thing since the first time I saw it.” She’d never asked Darien if she could drive it. It was his baby, and she enjoyed seeing him rip it around the city. She thought it might have something to do with the way his hands looked while gripping the wheel and gearshift. Then again, there wasn’t a thing he did that she didn’t find incredibly sexy.

The engine growled to a start. The only car in the city that could run, thanks to the little critter now sitting on the passenger’s seat, ducklike feet kicked out before him.

Loren looked down at the Hob. “Ready?”

Mortifer gave one nod. He pulled his seatbelt across his body and buckled it.

She lowered the emergency brake and put it in drive. “Let’s go.”

Darien had never believed in luck. Crediting chance with his hard-earned successes was not something he had ever been willing to do, but tonight he'd had a change of heart. It was luck, he knew, that had given he and the others the strength to kill those three colossal demons, whose might and speed were unparalleled. The strength to walk away from that battle with their hearts still beating.

No grenade necessary. No flamethrower. Though fuck, the latter would've come in handy. Instead, he and Travis had used magic, the others aiding them with their weapons, weakening the creatures wherever possible, and by whatever means.

Now, Darien was drained. He stood in the tunnel with the others, chest heaving with frantic breaths, sweat covering every inch of his aching body. There wasn't enough oxygen in the world to ease the sharp burning in his lungs. Thick black liquid ran down his cheeks and dripped off his jaw with every blink. The Venom was losing its potency, the supply in his blood dimming at an alarming rate.

Too much magic. He was using too much magic. The thoughts were a warning blaring in his head, but he ignored them, shoving them back and back and back, until he couldn't hear them anymore.

He took the bottle of Venom out of his pocket. Tipping his head back, he dripped more into his eyes, liquid spilling over and dampening his eyelashes.

Ivy stepped forward. "Darien, we can't keep going like this. *You* can't keep going like this." She had barely finished speaking before something drew her eye. Lightning-fast, she angled her body to face the entrance into Spirit Terra, index finger poised on the trigger on her gun, the others around her doing the same.

Darien didn't want to look, because he knew whatever he saw would douse the last of the hope burning inside him.

But he did anyway. He looked—and regretted it instantly.

"Fuck." He hadn't meant to say it out loud, but he couldn't help it.

Because there were more demons coming, and they were only two dozen metres away.

Darien stalked over to the table—the only one that hadn't been knocked on its side—and sifted through the items scattered across its surface, searching for the weapon he'd spotted earlier that evening.

He found it tucked between two boxes pressed up against the wall.

A grenade. A bomb containing raw magic, aura colors swirling within the smoky glass. The weapon he had been saving for when—and if—he needed it.

There was only one. He would have to make it count.

He turned back around. The monsters—four of them, all of them different breeds—were only twelve feet away now.

“Get back,” Darien gritted out, pushing past the others so he was in front of the gate. He pulled the pin out of the grenade, wound his arm back, and threw.

But one of the creatures—a humanoid thing with gray skin and a maw of sharp black teeth—stooped mid-run and grabbed—literally *grabbed* the grenade.

Darien’s mind emptied with shock. “No,” he breathed.

Tanner whispered, “That’s not possible.”

No. No, it wasn’t possible. They weren’t supposed to be that smart!

Boots crunched as several people in their group backed up a pace. Fear choked the room.

Darien shook his head in denial. “No, no, no, no, no.”

It was too late. Too late to react—to stop it.

His whole body turned weightless as the demon threw the grenade back through—

“*GET DOWN!*” Darien’s warning shredded his throat as it ripped through the tunnels.

His magic snapped out like an elastic band, forming a bubble around their group. It coated the walls and ceiling in under half a second, sending chills all over his body.

Darien held firm—

The echo of his last word was still fading away when the grenade detonated—right in his face—and the whole tunnel exploded.

—

Loren stuck close to Erasmus, hand extended in his direction, in case he were to fall, as they shuffled along the first ledge of sheer cristala that wrapped around the outside of the Control Tower.

They were about a hundred and fifty meters above ground, the height giving them a clear view of the chaos ensuing in every district.

Dead people lay in the streets. More were being slaughtered right before her eyes, and as they fell, their Familiars—if they were magic-born people—fell with them. Dogs and cats and wolves and birds and other animals faded away, becoming nothing but curling black tendrils that were soon evaporating in the wake of defeat, not a trace of them left behind. Dead. Gone, just like the people they were bound to.

Loren watched in horror as a witch a block away dragged herself across blood-soaked asphalt, to where her lynx Familiar lay. Hand and claw reached for each other before their dying breaths were expelled, death pulling them into its cold embrace. Some people were lucky enough to be holed up in one of the shelters throughout the city; the panic rooms in their houses; the underground bunkers.

But many weren't so fortunate. Hundreds of people had been pulled through windows shattered by demons, where they were flown into the sky or dragged into alleys to be eaten, their magic, if they had any, too weak to put up a worthy fight.

The grisly sight threw Loren back into her memories of the tragedy that had befallen this city on Kalendae.

But she refused to let those memories linger, refused to look any longer at the deaths being dealt out around her in the North End, as she sidled along the circumference of the tower, taking care to lean back against the structure instead of into open air, gravity waiting for the opportunity to suck her into its grip.

Erasmus followed, grunting with effort, shoes scraping the sheer ledge. A wind kissed with unnatural frost blew their hair and tore at their clothes. Singer was alert in her shadow, and as for Mortifer, he was clinging to her left ankle, the little Hob weighing next to nothing, his presence so undetectable that she sometimes had to glance down see if he was still there.

The panels of cristala on the Control Tower were broken up by needle-thin veins, visible to the mortal eye only up close. They looked exactly like the strange and colorful webbing that cut through the ground in the spirit realm, only these ones here were as silver as the cristala, the shades nearly exact.

There were two columns of panels that had webbing. Only two, though the columns stretched from the wide base of the tower all the way up to the sharp finial that pierced the starless sky.

Loren understood that these were channels for the anima mundi, the veins providing a swift and unobstructed flow of magic that rippled up from the core of the planet, all the way to the tip of the finial. The reason she had made the decision to climb up to this first ledge was to lessen the distance that her magic would have to travel. Anything that might aid her in this task, she would gladly take. But with the demons swarming the sky, it was too great a risk to climb any higher than this ledge. The flocks of them were so large, they looked like massive thunderclouds. They blotted out the moon every time they passed in front of it, plunging the city into shadows thick enough to feel.

When she reached one of the two columns that contained an innumerable amount of silver veins, she pivoted to face the tower,

horribly aware of the sheer drop into open air at her back, and flattened her right hand on the panel.

Erasmus's voice floated through the night as he stopped beside her. "I need you to understand the risks that come with doing this, Loren." He placed a hand on her elbow, but the gesture was not meant to restrain. It was to comfort and implore; to beg her to see this moment clearly, without any rash behavior clouding her judgement.

She understood his concern. She did. But she *had* to do this. Never again would she live through the same horror as Kalendae, when she had opened her eyes to a living nightmare. Darien had died that day, and if she didn't at least try to fix this mess, if he collapsed down there in those tunnels like he had at the carnival...

Loren closed her eyes. "I already know," she whispered. "The Widow told me that if I use my magic, I will die."

A beat of silence spread between them. Erasmus's hand tightened, ever so slightly, on her arm. "Then why are you doing this?"

"Because if I don't, *they* will die," she said, gesturing behind her, eyelids flying back open. The wind pushed the tears from her eyes and sent them sliding down her cheeks as she gritted out, a knife twisting in her heart, "And I can't live with that."

The creatures of the Blood Moon were making their way into the sewers. She could see them from here; there were droves of them, their numbers too great for the Fleet soldiers to keep up with. Now that the demons were heading below the streets in search of prey, Darien and the others would soon be facing attacks from all sides. Not just from the creatures that were coming from Spirit Terra, but the ones right here in this city. And even hellsehers—even *Darkslayers*—had their limits.

She'd made it this far, which was a win in itself. Maybe she could spend this night using her magic to fix everything that was broken, and maybe afterward she would have another shot at a normal life. Maybe it wasn't too late for her.

But even if it *was* too late, and even if she knew that she would die after doing this, she would still move forward with her decision. Shots were fired deep below ground, the rattle of bullets ricocheting through the streets, the sound telling Loren that the Devils and Angels were still holding the line.

She prayed to every god that had ever existed that none of them had fallen during this time.

With a deep breath that filled up her lungs with as much air as they could fit, Loren focused on conjuring her magic, drowning out the sound of every shot fired; every clashing blade; every battle cry; every snarl; every scream.

At the core of her concentration was an image of Darien's face. It

was a memory. A memory from when she had dined with him at Rook and Redding's, minutes after he'd saved her life in the alley between The Salted Caramel Ice Cream Parlour and Medea's Magic Tricks.

She would never forget that day. The way Darien had looked at her, as if she were made of magic and stardust and every good dream he'd ever dreamt. He'd looked at her as if he had finally found something he didn't want to lose. Something he would die to protect.

And he *had* protected her. He'd done such a great job of it, too.

Now it was her turn to protect *him*.

The conduit hanging from the chain around her neck began to glow from the emotions flooding her body. It warmed her chest with its comforting presence, a feeling that reminded her of a warm bath.

It was time.

She pressed her hand harder into the cristala panel...and poured her magic into the Control Tower.

A soft white light spread beneath her palm. It lit up each of her fingers and seeped into her wrist, spreading until her whole hand and forearm were limned in white. Magic flowed into the silver veins in the panel, like water coursing through small riverbeds. It spread swiftly, climbing up and up. It was a river of white light, but there were colors in it too. Every color. There was no black or gray, though. There were only bright colors here.

Soon, the whole tower was radiating energy and rainbow light. Sweat prickled across her brow as she pushed herself harder, shoving the magic out of her body and into the tower. She tipped her head back, watching it climb higher, willing it to reach the finial way up top.

It did. And when it got there, the bladelike object lit up with a light that was blinding.

With a pop and a sizzle that sounded like fireworks combusting, a dome of rainbow colors bubbled above the city. It spread all the way out to the city's perimeter, where it latched onto the ground, encompassing every building, every district, every defense post. She could feel it as if it were a part of her; could *see* it as if she were omniscient. It was as if an eye had opened deep inside her, one she hadn't been aware of having, never mind that the eye had been shut her whole life.

Loren watched the ripples of color on the spectrum shimmering above the urban sprawl of Angelthene. It was so powerful it tinted the Blood Moon, the vibrant shades diluting the orb's red glow like spilled ink. The sandy beaches dotting the coast of Angelthene sparkled like gemstones. Several miles of ocean glowed, as if the water had transformed into neon paint.

Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Violet. There was red-orange,



yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, red-violet. There was magenta and there was hazel; dark brown and cream. So many shades, all of them threading together with bright white bands.

It was beautiful.

With this forcefield of her own making now keeping any new creatures from entering the city, the Fleet soldiers might have the chance to gain the upper hand. But Darien—

An explosion came from down below. From the grid of tunnels below the city, where the others were stationed.

Loren peered over her shoulder to look toward the sound.

Although the pavement had not erupted, the buildings in the vicinity trembled from the stifled force of the blast.

Someone had shielded the city with their magic, keeping the street from caving in.

Loren had a pretty good idea who had shielded it.

That was when she saw Max and the others approaching in the distance. Dallas, Dominic, and Emilie were flying several miles ahead of the rest of the group, heading straight for the entrance to the tunnels farther south.

They had made it.

—

They were nearly there.

Max could see the Control Tower from way over here. The structure was dark and silent, no magic coursing through it, the sky devoid of the forcefield that usually tinted the nightly canvas of outer space with green.

As he ran, he and the others cut down any demon in their path. With bullets and magic, they felled them, sometimes entire packs at a time, the four of them working as a single, unstoppable unit.

Blue's water magic choked up demon lungs; Sabine's razor-sharp teeth ripped out throats and hearts that pulsed with black blood; Cyra fired shots from a pistol, the crack of her bullets mingling with the ones from Max's own gun. Together, they must've defeated hundreds, but it wasn't enough. There were still too many, and until the Blood Moon set, these demons were trapped in a killing frenzy, unable to break free.

The Fleet soldiers were as remarkable at fighting as they were flying. They twirled through the streets of Angelthene like shooting stars, mighty wings kicking up gusts of wind, blades and crossbows and other weapons glimmering. Max had never seen them fight before, but damn was it a sight to behold, the kind he found himself marveling at, even in the midst of this destruction. This chaos.

Max scanned the roads up ahead, searching for the entrance to the tunnels that would lead them to Darien. As he ran, a demon charged out of the dark alley to his left.

He intercepted its attack, pivoting to block the thing from taking a chunk out of Cyra's arm, and drove a blade through its skull.

It fell with a gurgle. By the time its body hit the ground, their group was already a dozen feet away.

"Thanks," Cyra panted, pushing herself to keep up with the group.

"Don't mention it."

Another demon charged at them from behind, red eyes glowing like rubies struck by sunlight.

Max unsheathed a blade from where it was strapped to his hip. He twisted around and threw it mid-run.

The blade hit home between the creature's eyebrows, the force behind the blow causing it to tumble head over feet.

By the time Max turned back around, an outpouring of rainbow light was drenching the whole city.

Max's focus went to the Control Tower. He kept running, boots slapping asphalt, his footfall mixing with Cyra's, Blue's, and the scratching of Sabrina's claws.

Where she was flying several blocks ahead, Dallas shouted, "The forcefield!" She pointed. "Look!"

The Control Tower was glowing every color imaginable. The finial was brighter than the sun, the tip of it projecting a forcefield of rippling colors out over the city.

And standing on the first ledge, about a hundred and fifty feet up, was Loren. Erasmus was at her side, and clutching her ankle like a piece of shadowy jewelry was Mortifer, whose tiny red eyes found Max's from all the way over here.

The Hob waved a tiny hand, the rainbow light of the Control Tower streaming through the spaces between his fingers.

A startled laugh slipped through Max's lips as he waved back.

Loren was facing the tower, palm flattened on a panel of cristala, her whole arm glowing as she poured her aura into the tower.

Max watched in awe as the city was transformed; as shadows were driven away like dawn splitting through the sky, and monsters fled in search of darkness.

Streetlights flared back to life, pools of radiant color that resembled Loren's aura magic bleeding across sidewalks.

Headlights flashed awake, engines restarting.

Traffic lights turned back on.

Powerlines buzzed with energy.

Multicolored light shone through thousands of windows, and skyscrapers lit up from ground to roof as spell systems came back to

life, visible even without the Sight, runes of varying shades running in columns that covered buildings like vivid coats of paint.

It was a miracle. Max could hardly believe his eyes.

"She's incredible." These words came from Cyra, who was gazing up at Loren in wonderment.

An explosion shook the ground, jarring Max and the others, nearly causing Blue to fall on her ass. He grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her along, unwilling to slow, even for one second.

The blast had come from the tunnels. From the place where Darien and the others were defending the city.

Max lifted his watch to his mouth and turned the face of it until it clicked. "Darien," he panted. They had been running for so long that his throat tasted metallic. Holding the watch closer, trying his best to keep his hand steady as he ran, he tried again, "Darien, can you hear me?" Nothing. "*Darien.*" Silence.

Max swore and pushed himself faster, leg muscles screaming in protest, puddles of partially frozen blood splashing underfoot. He could sense Sabrine watching him from the corner of her eye, but he didn't look at her. He had no idea what his face might reveal at this time. The emotions it might betray.

A crackle drifted from the speaker on his watch. The kind of crackle that told him someone was preparing to speak.

*Please be alive, Max begged. Please be alive.*

—

When Darien came to, he couldn't tell up from down. By the time he cracked open his eyes, shards of glass and debris were still raining down upon his limp form, clacking and clinking on the ground.

The tunnel had succumbed to the raw magic trapped inside the grenade. Fiery particles and flakes of ash floated through the air.

Darien was lying on his stomach several feet from the gate, the bodies of his family and friends surrounding him, the shapes of them obscured by a drop cloth of smoke.

Nobody was moving. Piles of debris made it difficult to see faces, but he spotted the curve of an Angel's wing near the east wall, and a head of curly hair that looked like Jack's.

Too still. Everyone was too still.

Darien tried to reach out a hand, but his fingers wouldn't respond, not even a twitch. His mouth tasted like rust, and his lungs were on fire.

After an eternity, he managed to lift his heavy head off the ground, the simple movement causing his surroundings to lurch and shimmer.

On the cement where his head had been resting was a puddle of

red and black liquid. Blood and Venom, he realized. A trickle of blood was running from both ears. Both nostrils. It pooled on his tongue and coated his throat, so much of it, he was nearly choking on it.

When he tried to push himself up onto weak hands that shook, the gloves of his bodysuit cut up and grimy, it felt like his body was no longer his own. The lungs, the heart, the brain, and the eardrums were in excruciating pain, a level of discomfort so great it felt like they had all ruptured, leaving behind a husk that could barely function.

It was only the sight of his battered sister, shoving debris out of her path as she dragged her body to her husband, whose face was bloody and bruised, that had the strength returning to Darien's arms, just enough to push himself up.

Ivy. He had to get up for Ivy. For the others.

Everything hurt. Every muscle. Every limb. Even his *skin* hurt. The rips in the bodysuit revealed glimpses of raw, bruised, and filthy flesh. Bolts of pain shot through his skull, making his eyes tear up and threaten to close. He winced, but he refused to bend.

A sound that was a cross between a sob and a scream of anger tore out of him as he staggered to his feet, jaw clenched tight. Blood dribbled from his lips, and he spat out a mouthful of it, teeth and gums red.

As soon as he stood, he fell back to his knees, catching himself with a hand braced on the blood-soaked ground before him.

He took this second to breathe; to gather his bearings.

Smoke, dust, and noxious fumes choked the tunnels. Small fires burned throughout, the demon corpses and cardboard boxes having lit up with flames from the explosion. Darien couldn't tell if the horde of demons that had pushed through minutes ago had died from the grenade and were now dead on this floor, or had made it past him and the others and into the tunnels.

His family and friends were alive, thank the gods. Everyone was alive, but beaten down and filthy. One by one, they pushed themselves to their feet and checked in on each other. Their survival was a small miracle Darien clung to, even as Death beckoned to him, a tempting offer he was having trouble refusing as pain knifed through every limb.

So much pain. There was too much of it, and as he listened to the beating of his heart, the time between each pulsation grew. Grew and grew, and as his heartrate slowed, he began to drift...

When he blinked, eyelids crusted with blood and dust, he saw a great tree. A tree and a river. They were two separate images that did not belong together, as if someone had ripped two photographs in half and taped the mismatching pieces together.

It was the river he focused on. The river that bled into an ocean. A

never-ending ocean with a beach of white sand that sparkled under sunlight, as if it were made of diamond fragments. White-capped waves lapped against the shore. There were gulls too. And palm trees. Darien had always loved palm trees, though he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was all the surfing he used to do with his mom. Sometimes Ivy would go too. He could stay out on those sun-warmed waves for hours—

“Darien.” Someone was shaking him where he knelt. The voice was deep, and in his delirium, Darien didn't recognize it.

The river was still there. It was so beautiful, Darien found himself wanting to follow it.

But something was missing. A face more beautiful than the river; more beautiful than the wide, wide ocean; more beautiful than the clearest blue. More beautiful than anything.

He tried to go back. Tried to look for her—

“Darien,” the voice said again.

Darien swayed in place. A pair of rough hands on his shoulders held him upright. When Darien managed to focus his bleary eyes, he saw a second person crouching before him, his face so similar to his own. Was he looking in a mirror?

No. That was Travis. But it wasn't Travis who was speaking. It was Malakai.

“Darien,” the Reaper was saying. Another blink to clear his eyes, and Darien glimpsed the lower half of Malakai's face, silver canines showing when he spoke. “What happened here?”

When Darien blinked again, the last of the ocean and the river washed away, and he was back in the hazy tunnels, sucking down ragged breaths hindered by all the blood in his throat, a thick web of it that wouldn't go down, no matter how many times he swallowed.

Most of the Reapers were here. Malakai, Aspen, Jewels. Valen and Sylvan. Brodie and Macen. While some guarded the Veil, others helped up Devils and Angels, checking to see if they were okay.

Jewels was tending to Conrad. She stood at the Angel's back, examining his wings. One of them was twisted in a way that suggested it was broken, but the Angel was just as stubborn as Darien, and would continue to fight through the pain.

Aspen was holding onto Lace, keeping her on her feet, the latter appearing as spent as Darien felt.

Tanner had both hands braced against the far wall, head bowed, arms shaking as he retched, vomiting onto the ground. Jack and Ivy were with him, the latter attempting to settle his heaving with a hand on his back, her mouth forming words of comfort.

Raw magic was a son of a fucking bitch, and that blast had nearly done them all in.

“He alive?” Sylvan’s booming voice filled the tunnels, the volume making Darien wince.

“Barely,” Darien slurred. With a push of his legs, the action nearly costing him all the strength he had left, he staggered to his feet.

“Careful,” Travis said, his voice far away as he helped Darien find his balance, a hand gripping his shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Darien managed, though he winced as he said it, the sound of his own voice unbearably loud.

With a roll of his aching shoulders, he walked over to where Valen and Brodie were guarding the Veil. Travis stayed at his side, limping with every step. He assumed his position at Darien’s left.

Darien glanced at his cousin. “Trav—”

“If you’re fine, I’m fine,” Travis said, facing the gate. His eyes flicked to Darien’s face. “You look like shit, cous.”

A smirk ghosted across Darien’s mouth. “So do you.” He looked over his shoulder to see the others forming a new line behind them, Ivy gritting her teeth in pain. “Sis,” he said. “You okay?”

“I’m alive,” Ivy said, readying her gun. “And don’t you dare tell me to sit this one out.” She lifted the gun, pointing it at the gate as she concluded with a murmur, “Because you know I won’t.”

Darien’s eyes met Lace’s. “Lacey?”

“Same answer as Ivy,” she said, spitting out blood. “I’m in until sunrise.”

Malakai stepped up to Darien’s right. “What’s the plan?”

Darien swallowed a mouthful of blood. “Venom,” he replied, voice thick. “And don’t let a single fucking thing through.” He looked at the Reaper, whose black eyes met his. “You and I have shadow magic. Death magic—I don’t really know what the proper term is, or why we can suddenly use it, but we have to. Regular weapons don’t work on these things. Their skin is nearly impenetrable.”

“Shadow magic...,” Malakai mused, brows knitting together. Darien thought he was likely remembering that night at the warehouse, when they’d had no choice but to use their magic as a shield when that hellseher had exploded. The first time Darien had ever seen magic that wasn’t his own.

“I have it too,” Travis said, wiping his bloody nose on the arm of his bodysuit. “Venom helps bring it out. You got any?”

Malakai reached into his jacket pocket and produced a bottle. “Are you kidding? I’m addicted to this shit.” He tipped his head back and dripped two drops into each eye.

Tanner muttered, “Of course Malakai would say that as if it’s a good thing.” The statement earned a chuckle from Valen and Sylvan.

It was a small reprieve that they had these few minutes to discuss this; to catch their breath before the next threats barrelled through the

gate.

Darien could sense more creatures coming. The night was still young, and a demon's hunger was never quelled.

"Jewels," Travis called over his shoulder.

Malakai's sister leaned forward to hear him better.

"If we live through this, you wanna go out?"

Jewels smirked. "I don't even know your name," she teased.

Travis gave her a bloody smile. "Damn." He faced the gate again.

But then Jewels whispered, "Yes, Travis Devlin, I'll go out with you."

Travis grinned. "Cool."

"Dare," Jack said. Darien tilted his head slightly to show that he was listening, but kept his focus on the landscape in Spirit Terra. "If you and Travis have the same magic—"

"Shut up, Jacky," Darien said steadily, knowing exactly how Jack was about to end that sentence. The last thing he wanted was for Ivy to be anywhere but *behind* him. The safest place for her was behind him. "I love you, Jack, but shut up this time, please."

Jack chuckled. Always laughing, even when their city was poised on the brink of destruction—and even when Darien was three seconds from disowning and excommunicating him.

But Ivy said, "I know what he was about to say." Her words were all for Darien. "But I won't fight you on this. Not this time."

Darien heard all the words his sister didn't voice. Ivy had been careful all her life to not overly use her magic, and whenever she did summon it, the purpose was to track a target or protect herself if needed. Even if she had the same kind of magic, she didn't have the practice she needed to face these monsters.

Speaking of monsters...

The horizon in Spirit Terra was dotted with more of them. Countless more, all heading this way.

"...*Darien...*," said a voice. A voice far away. Was he imagining it? It was small and quiet and slightly tinny, as if someone were speaking to him through...

His watch. It was coming from his watch.

"Max?" Darien lifted the watch to his mouth and turned the cracked face of it. There was no audible *click* to tell him that the mouthpiece was working, likely because his ears were crusted with blood, the eardrums nearly ruptured. They were in far too much pain to pick up on such a soft sound. "Max?" he said again, swallowing more blood.

"We're coming," Max replied. It sounded like he was running, every breath he drew a rasping pant. "We're almost there."

"I don't understand," Max murmured.

He was standing in front of the pillar to the left of the rip in the Veil—the rip that had turned an entire wall into a doorway to another world. Standing on either side of him were Dallas and Blue, Darien and the others guarding the gate to Spirit.

As soon as they had made it down here, they had inserted the Moonstones into the impressions in the pillars, the stone swallowing them up immediately.

But the gate hadn't shut. The demons were still coming, and the others were burning out, Darien pushing himself so hard that Max feared they only had minutes left before he would fall to his knees. And if they didn't have Darien...

He refused to finish that thought.

Malakai was nearly as strong with his magic as Darien, which was a miracle in itself, considering the horribly small amount of time they'd had to prepare for this. But even the Reaper was tiring, and he was using so much Venom that Max thought he might pass out the way Darien had at the carnival. Venom may be a drug, a key that opened the floodgates of their magic, but eventually the outpouring of substantial power would bleed dry, leaving them defenseless.

Dallas stepped up to the pillar and brushed her fingers across a few lines of very faint lettering on the left side, the inscription so small he hadn't noticed it before.

"What is this?" Dallas mused. Her red ponytail swayed as she turned her head, scanning the room until she found Dominic. The Angel was slaughtering a creature that looked like a decaying wolf, strips of gray flesh hanging off a skeletal body, the teal-and-black heart that was visible through its ribcage stilling with one last thump. "Dominic!" she called.

He looked up, wiping sweat off his brow, blood streaming down the front of his black bodysuit.

"Can you read this?" Dallas shouted.

The Angel hurried over to them. Dallas stepped back to give him room, taking Max by an arm, pulling him back as well.

Icy eyes scanned the pillar. As Dominic translated, more monsters leapt through the entrance. More bullets were fired. More bodies hit the ground. Every time Max heard the fleshy thud of a life being



ended, he checked to make sure everyone he cared about was still standing.

They had to close this gate.

A few minutes that felt like a thousand years passed before Dominic read the lines, his bass voice nearly swallowed up by shouts and snarls.

“Sun, moon

Moon, Sun

What are we but two sides to the same coin?

The same but different

Different but the same.”

The room went quiet, save the cracking of bones as magic split demon bodies into pieces.

“On your left!” Jack bellowed.

Travis’s magic swept out, latching onto two bat-like creatures that had slipped through the cracks in the frontline. Their wingbeats kicked up a fiery storm that scorched the tunnels. A hail of fire rained down upon them, stopped by Blue’s water magic, an umbrella of pine-scented rain belling out to shield their group.

Travis was swift to down the creatures, more effective than a volley of arrows. Wings snapped as their bodies hit the floor, embers dying out.

“What does that mean?” Darien panted, streams of black running down his cheeks. His hand lashed out with blinding speed, the force of his magic sending a creature that vaguely resembled a dog careening into the east wall, where its spine broke in half, spikes of jagged bone tearing through skin. A spray of black oiled the walls, and the dog fell to the ground with a yelp. The jewel in its forehead was red, its fur like fire.

Inferno. Creatures of the Inferno.

But *how*?

A breath left Darien’s lungs, followed by a single word: “No.”

Max’s blood went cold at Darien’s tone.

Fear was an emotion Darien rarely showed, but it filled his voice and face as he shook his head, staring into Spirit Terra, and said again, “No. *No, no, no, no.*”

Max walked behind Darien, peering between him and Malakai to see what they were looking at.

More beasts like the one Darien had downed at the carnival were heading straight for them.

Big as trucks. Heads like skulls. White scales. Grotesquely muscled bodies that were a cross between human and animal.

"I'm assuming we don't like these ones?" Valen asked.

Malakai swore. "I've nearly reached my limit, man," he said to Darien through clenched teeth, breaths rasping through the room. "I'm shaking—*look*." His hands *were* shaking, and Max knew it had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with exhaustion.

Darien shifted his feet farther apart, and with an outward sweep of both hands, he reinforced the wall of shimmering black that he'd built around their group.

Max's skin tingled, his blood warming as the protective magic washed over him, candle smoke filling the area. But even *he* could feel the difference between this wall and the one Darien had cast before. It was weaker. Diluted. A flicker of smoke instead of a solid wall of black adamant. Not only that, but Darien's head and shoulders were dipping in a way that told Max he was seconds from passing out.

The monsters drew closer.

Closer.

Darien's magic faltered.

A breath left his lungs.

Blood drained from faces. Frightened glances were exchanged, hands tightening on weapons.

The protective wall of shadowy magic flickered like a dying flame.

Just as the demons reached the gate, leaping through with otherworldly snarls that curdled blood, Darien's magic went out entirely, leaving them all defenseless except for Malakai and Travis's magic, both of their walls guttering and transparent, not nearly as strong—

The tunnels were choked with screams and shouts. Without Darien's magic, the tables had turned, and not in their favor.

Blood sprayed the walls as the monsters attacked.

—

The new forcefield bubbling above the city had given the Fleet soldiers the upper hand.

But while it may be helping Roark and his army, it was doing nothing to aid Darien and the other Devils. The Angels. The Reapers, who Loren had seen bolting into the tunnels not long ago, likely answering Darien's call for aid.

Loren could scarcely breathe. She stood on the ledge of the tower, hand still on the panel, eyes forever diverted toward that one street that branched off from Angelthene Boulevard.

Max and the others had disappeared below the grate minutes ago, but shots were still being fired, and hellseher magic rumbled below the city like an earthquake. Which meant the plan they'd put in place

to close the gate wasn't working.

As Loren watched, waiting for any sign that would tell her the others had finally won this endless battle, thoughts spun through her head, along with memories.

*She was the key*, the Widow had said of her mother. *The turning of metal that split two worlds.*

Loren faced Erasmus, who was still at her side, quiet as ever. "Our world used to be one with Spirit Terra," she said. "Didn't it?"

Erasmus's eyes met hers. There was a twitch in his tightly closed mouth that told her he was trying to answer her question, trying to speak in truth, but was unable to do so.

Loren knew that look well.

She persisted, "My mother was the one who split the worlds in two. I *know* she was." Loren wasn't sure how her mother had done it, but this conclusion she'd drawn... It *had* to be true. Spirit Terra and the world she knew were two sides of a single coin, only separated by a curtain that eventually became known as the Veil. The curtain her mother had cast.

The legends—they were all true. They had to be.

Loren was moving, sidling along the circumference of the tower, feet nearly slipping on sheer cristala.

"Loren, wait," Erasmus tried, grunting as he hurried after her.

Loren didn't slow. Mortifer gripped her ankle tight, arms and legs wrapped around it like a koala.

"Even if they have the Moonstones, they can't seal the rip without me," she called over her shoulder, moving as quickly as she could, her words nearly swallowed up by the wind. "They need my magic."

"Loren, you have done enough." Her father might be forbidden from speaking about certain things, but the answer in his statement was clear, and she knew what she had to do.

"No," she whispered. "I haven't." She kept moving, not slowing, Erasmus hurrying after her in silence.

She had one last thing left to give, and she would give it.

—

There were two demons left to kill.

Though Malakai and Travis had managed to take one down together, they were winded now, barely able to stand, barely able to keep their eyes open. With the threat of the Tricking forever looming at the backs of every magic-wielder in the world of Terra, no one in these tunnels had undergone training that might've aided them in the fight tonight. Every victory stemmed strictly from the will to live—to protect this city and the people in it.

And every victory was a miracle. But Darien had a feeling their miracles had nearly been used up.

The others were currently killing the second monster, the thing bellowing out one last roar that vibrated through the tunnels. The sound was soon dying off with a snap and a gurgle as Dominic and Conrad cut the thing's head off with adamant blades, while Lace, Ivy, Hanli, and Sylvan held it down as best as they could.

It was the third demon that was the hardest to fell.

Darien kept himself slightly in front of Jack and Tanner as they attacked the creature, lashing out with magic and weapons. Darien was holding it down with the force of his shadows—the very last of his magic that he had been able to summon, after nearly costing everyone their lives by letting his shield fall. But his magic was weaker than it had been all night, weaker than ever before, and he was having trouble holding onto it. Sweat ran down his temples and burned his eyes. The exhaustion sweeping through his body told him the Venom was nearly out, and the bottle in his pocket was empty.

A mighty roar shook the tunnels as the creature bucked under the hold of Darien's magic.

Darien stumbled back, ducking under a lashing of its barbed tail, an attack that likely would've been lethal, had it landed true.

The beast was moving again before Darien could gain the upper hand. A claw swept out with deadly speed, heading straight for Tanner—

Darien moved, pushing Tanner out of the way so hard, the hacker stumbled and fell.

*"Darien!"* Tanner was shouting his name, again and again, as he scrambled back to his feet, eyes wide with fear.

There was no pain. At least not at first. Darien was barely aware of the razor-sharp claw sinking right into his side, sliding through his flesh with ease. It dug in deep, and when the creature retracted it, the flow of blood began. So much blood.

Tanner was hysterical. He was at Darien's side, holding him up, hand pressed against the wound.

Jack rushed over, ducking under another swipe of the creature's tail, the barbs coming so close to his head that Darien was able to react, able to project the very last drop of his magic out to protect Jack.

With a battle cry, Darien ended the demon with a lashing of his shadows that choked the whole room. It swept into the creature's airways and eye sockets, arrowing into its skull.

It dropped dead with a slam.

That was when Darien dropped too.

He fell to his knees, pain splitting through the bone as they struck

cement. Darien was vaguely aware that the only thing keeping him from fully collapsing was Tanner's hands gripping his shoulders. Soon, Jack was there too, crouching beside him.

Tanner's voice was a broken shout, the sound of it so defeated that it hurt worse than the wound in Darien's side. "*Why would you do that, Darien? Why would you do that? WHY?*"

"Tanner, I'm fine." But he couldn't draw a breath. And as the seconds wore on, he realized the reason why he couldn't breathe was because he was choking on his own blood.

There was moisture streaming down Tanner's face. Sweat and tears, Darien realized, as his friend wailed, "*We need you!*"

"Yeah, well I need all of you!" Darien shouted back, wincing as the muscles around his wound tensed from the effort to project his voice.

Everything shimmered, as if someone had pushed his head underwater. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't clear his vision.

"Poison," someone said. The voice was hollow.

Jack. That was Jack's voice. Darien had never heard him sound like that, not once—

"Shit, he's bleeding too much." Ivy. "You guys, we need help! We need to get him to a hospital. *Please help me!*"

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Loren's breaths rasped through the damp tunnels as she ran toward the gate into Spirit Terra, feet splashing in puddles of gods-knew-what, eyes straining to see in the dark. The air was tainted with blood, metal, saltpeter, and the candle smoke of magic.

She was alone now, Erasmus waiting in Darien's car on the street above, protected by Mortifer's magic. He'd tried to come with, but it hadn't taken much convincing on Loren's part to make him agree to stay behind. And Loren knew better than anyone how useless an ordinary human was in a situation like this.

It was a mystery how she managed to keep her feet moving, every breath burdened by the terror gripping her lungs and heart in a fist.

The terror was not for herself, but for her friends. Terror for who she might see standing when she rounded the corner up ahead.

And who might not be standing.

"Please." The word was a scraping chant, carrying as far as her echoing footsteps, each dragging inhalation sending sharp darts of pain through her chest. "*Please. Please.*" She needed them. She needed all of them, and she would settle for nothing less.

Another few steps brought her past the waterfalls and into the room that housed the gate.

The gruesome scene that spread before her nearly buckled her

knees.

The whole place was destroyed. Every inch of the floor and walls was black with blood, the former crowded with countless bodies. The gate had ripped open wider, looking more like the mouth of a monster than a doorway, the ground around it caved in. The edges of the doorway were jagged, spreading with each passing minute, the sight of it like a strip of gauze being ripped open. Some of those tears were translucent, showing glimpses of the terrifying world lurking just beyond the wall. The world that was poised to devour theirs.

But it was the sight of her friends that hurt the most, and as she scanned the area, bit by bit, cataloguing the faces that meant more to her than her own life, she felt the tension in her chest ease.

There were Dallas and Max and Sabrine. There were the Reapers and the Angels. Emilie was here too. The Devils—the Devils were the ones who made her knees weak as she checked for all of them, counting all seven, *needing* all seven to be here, to be standing.

Alive. They were all alive, but they were covered in blood and dirt and looking like they were seconds from falling under the weight of exhaustion, after fighting here all bloody night, defending this city.

The seventh Devil was the one who drew her eye. Darien.

Darien, who was kneeling on the ground near the south wall, the others surrounding him, blocking part of him from view, which was why she hadn't noticed...hadn't noticed before...

A strangled cry hitched in her throat.

He was hurt. The Fleet bodysuit he was wearing was ripped nearly entirely to shreds, and there was a wound in his side, slick with blood.

So much blood. Too much. Loren didn't need to be a genius to know the wound was fatal.

It took Darien a moment to realize she was here. And when his eyes found hers, they were unfocused. He was blinking heavily, as if trying to clear his vision.

This moment felt so surreal, so horrible, that she was barely aware of the fact that she was walking, moving straight for Darien, the ground dipping and rising under her feet. The conduit warmed her chest, pulsing like a second heart.

This had to be a dream. A bad dream she couldn't shake off. The pounding of her heart was loud in her ears, the sound drowning everything else out.

Loren hurried across the room. Darien opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. There was only blood. His cheeks were streaked with black, and red swam in the whites of his bloodshot eyes.

Venom. He'd used Venom again, putting his own life and health on the line to protect the people in this room, to save the city from falling to the creatures of Spirit Terra. It was so like Darien to do something

like this, so like Darien to risk his life, that Loren found she couldn't even be angry with him for it.

Because she was about to do the very same thing.

The others moved aside to let her through. Somehow, she managed to close the last few feet between them, and when she got to Darien, she fell to her knees before him, no longer able to keep herself up.

"It's okay," she whispered on a shaky breath, hands fluttering in the air between them, unsure where to touch, how to help. A sob built in her chest, but she choked it back, willing herself to be strong. She had to be strong for him. "It's okay, it's okay. I'm here, I'm here." She pressed a careful hand over his wound.

Blood instantly flowed between her fingers. Black blood, as if there was something festering inside him, making him sick.

She had to get it out.

"Sweetheart, don't," Darien tried to say, but he choked on his own blood and curled over himself, nearly passing out. He reached for her hand, but he missed by several inches, his fingers closing on empty air.

"Don't you dare tell me no, Darien Cassel," she said, that sob managing to break free. "I am not living without you, do you understand me?" Carefully, she took his face into her hands, getting blood all over one cheek as she forced him to look at her. "I am not. Living. Without. You." She looked up at the others, eyes swimming with tears. "Lay him down please."

"Stop her," he slurred. "Please." But every word he spoke was weaker than the one that came before it, and she knew she only had minutes left to do this. "She can't. You can't let her. Please." His voice broke on the last word. Shattered, just like her heart.

The others glanced at each other, not knowing what to do.

"Fuck if I let you die," Max bit out, eyes shining.

Tanner pressed a hand to his mouth, looking like he was about to be sick, tears running between his palm and face.

Travis drew a ragged breath. "You're not going anywhere, Dare."

It was Ivy, tears streaming down her face, who said thickly, "We love you, Darien. We all love you." It wasn't just a statement, but also a reply. A reply to Darien's request to stop her from healing him.

No one in these tunnels was willing to lose him. Not tonight.

Not ever.

The pained look that swept across his face was not the physical kind, Loren knew. It was pain that stemmed from understanding.

Together, Max and Jack eased him down onto his good side.

"Screw you guys," Darien gurgled.

"We love you too, Dare," Jack replied.

Loren shuffled closer. "It's okay, Darien," she sniffled. "We're going

home soon, okay? It's almost over."

"I *am* home," he slurred. When she looked at him, she saw tears welling in his eyes, the clear moisture diluting the blood. "You're my home, Lola. You're my home."

Loren wept. "You're mine too, Darien. You're mine too."

He tried to reach for her again, that hand closing on open air, unable to find her. She took his hand into her right one and clasped it tightly, while she flattened her other over his chest. She could feel his skin through the rips in the bodysuit; it was so cold.

Darien winced with every breath—the breaths that were few and far between, death only minutes away now. She kept her hand pressed over his heart, her bodysuit slick with all the blood, some of it Darien's.

"Close your eyes, Darien," Loren whispered hoarsely.

"But I can't see you."

"I'll be there too. We're going to the ocean."

The ocean was the only place where she knew how to do this. That magical place she'd dreamt up the very first time she had ever healed him, the place they returned to on the bad nights, the nights when he jolted awake, unable to sleep. The nights when he needed her comfort. The ocean was where she brought him when she awoke in the night to him bolting up in bed, sweating and breathing heavily. She would lay him back down, and he would set his head on her chest and listen to her heart, his arms wrapped firmly around her middle. She would paint a picture for him with words, and together they would go there. Together they would dream—would fall back asleep.

That was where she took him now.

"Do you see it?" Loren whispered.

The faintest nod.

Loren closed her eyes. "I need you to stay by the ocean, okay? I need you to stay there—just for a minute. Okay?"

"Okay." The word was the softest croak. His heart was slowing, and she knew it had very little to do with being calm.

She had to hurry.

Even with Darien right in front of her, she still needed a memory to summon her magic. A happy memory, an image of him smiling and unharmed, the kind of memory she wanted to switch into his reality again. She pictured him like that, pictured him standing up and walking out of this horrible place. Into the future he deserved.

The future with the ocean. They would find that ocean one day, and together they would go there. Together, they would build a home. A new life. She could see them there. Could see her and Darien walking on that white sand, barefoot. The sun would stream through his dark hair; the salty wind would caress his skin and blow through



his clothes. Loren imagined how that sunlight would feel, and as she imagined its heat, a warmth of her own making pooled in her chest.

“Look,” someone whispered. Malakai.

Slowly, Loren opened her eyes.

Light and heat spread through Darien. It began in the wound in his side, and it flowed from her palms and into his body, until his entire form was limned in white and rainbow light.

He looked ethereal. Even with blood all over him, even while he was hanging on by an inch of his life, he looked like he’d come from the Fifth Dimension, every part of him glowing.

A startled laugh slipped out of several mouths.

“It’s a miracle,” Tanner whispered.

“No,” Ivy said quietly, voice thick with tears of happiness. “It’s love.”

*Love works its own magic.*

Loren closed her eyes again and kept going. And as her aura flowed into him, healing every part of him that was hurting, she absorbed his pain. Took it away. She could feel every wound he’d suffered tonight as if she’d lived it herself, the pain unbearable. But she took it, enduring every bit of it. Every bruise. Every scrape. Every blast of raw magic. Every drop of otherworldly poison.

Every last thing. She took it all away, willing it to leave his body and enter hers instead.

Darien had given too much. He *always* gave too much. He could believe all he wanted that he was a sinner incapable of redemption, his soul too dark to be saved, but Loren knew better. She could spot an angel when she saw one, and this angel’s sin was that he loved too much.

As she knelt there, eyes still shut, she listened to Darien’s heartbeat, fluttering under her palm.

The seconds wore on. And then those seconds turned into minutes.

That heartbeat strengthened. The flutter of his pulse shifted into a strong, determined beat, and soon the back of his hand was brushing across her jaw.

That hand was no longer cold.

Loren opened her eyes. When she looked at Darien’s face, his skin was still filthy with blood, dirt, and Venom, but the wounds—they were all gone. Every single one, not even a new scar left behind.

His eyes were exceptionally soft as he studied her face, knuckles brushing away the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

But she saw the intent in his gaze—the kind that told her he was seconds from acting, those eyes that were no longer bloodshot snapping to the mouth of Spirit Terra at her back.

He would fight her on her next decision—she knew he would.

"I love you," she whispered on a ragged breath.

And then she was up and running, fingers ripping through his grasp before he could stop her.

"Loren!" he shouted. She heard him attempt to stand. "Stop her, please!"

But she was already at the pillar, already slapping her hand on the space just below the Moonstone on the left side. Power crackled in her teeth. As she poured her magic into the stone, giving everything she had left to give, she was vaguely aware of the others restraining Darien. Darien, who was shouting and thrashing, calling her name.

She kept going, knowing that if he stopped her, she wouldn't have the strength left to start again. *She* had to fix this. She had to. The others had nearly died again, and she would be damned if she let this night repeat itself by not closing this gate.

Her magic was draining quickly, she could feel it, the final drops dripping out of her as she poured her aura into the pillar.

There were more creatures coming. That pitch-black mist in the distance in Spirit Terra was spreading, poised to engulf everything in its path, and if it got in here...

Out and out and out, she poured her magic. As it left her body, she began to feel stretched thin and hollowed out, her hand trembling on the pillar. Her blood felt icy, and her teeth chattered.

Once her magic had filled the left pillar, it spread into the right, until both were shining like smaller models of the Control Tower, the adamant shifting into reflective glass that illustrated the destruction behind her, the terrified faces of her family watching.

The moons engraved in the pillars switched into suns with a *snap* that carried through the tunnel, as if a light switch had been hit.

Suns that looked just like the solar amulet she'd worn since she was a baby, the necklace her father had given her.

The material shifted from obsidian to a rosy stone.

"Sunstone," Dallas whispered.

"The same but different," Maximus murmured, boots scraping as he approached. "Different but the same."

The gate rippled shut, colors knitting together like yarn until there was nothing left of the strange world on the other side of that foggy entrance.

It was over.

Relief flooded Loren's body, the emotion so strong it nearly winded her. She turned, eyes locking with Darien's.

His were bolted wide with fear, the hands of his family gripping him by the arms, still holding him back.

"Loren." Her name was a soft whisper on his breath.

His face was the last thing she saw before she collapsed.

Darien sprinted across the room. His sister called out to him, and he sensed her following, along with the others, but he paid them no mind as he skidded to a stop before Loren's limp body. He dropped to a crouch on the ground beside her, glass and stones ripping into his knees.

"Sweetheart?" His mouth wobbled so hard it almost cut off the word. Carefully, he drew her into his arms, cradling her head in the crook of his elbow. "Loren." His voice was a shaky whisper, his hand trembling as he brushed the hair out of her face. "*Loren.*"

Clutching her body, he lowered his head to her chest, listening for a heartbeat. It was faint, too faint, the beats few and far between.

He looked up at the others, who were gathered around. "I need to get her to the hospital. Her heart is barely beating."

He pushed to his feet.

Malakai stepped forward. "I'll come with you."

"We'll all go," Maximus said. "The streets are going to be flooded with demons until the sun comes up."

"I just need to get to my car," Darien panted, making for the exit. "I need to get her to my car, and then I'll be fine from there. You guys need to help the Fleet."

The others followed. With Loren's healing magic sparking in his veins, he felt brand new, not even a limp in his step. Renewed strength flowed through every limb, and his ears were not even ringing anymore.

Miracle. She was a miracle.

Darien started running, using his Sight to navigate the dark stretch of tunnel that would lead to the exit. Once he saw the glow of a streetlight filtering through the grate up ahead, he blinked it away. Shots were fired behind him as the others downed demons that charged out of the network of tunnels.

When he made it to the metal ladder, he balanced Loren's weight in one arm, using the other to climb.

Once he was at the top, he threw the grate open with an upward push of his shoulder, minding Loren all the while, and pulled himself up onto the street.

The sight of the city briefly staggered him. The streets were black with blood, and there were bodies everywhere. A lot of those bodies were demons, but a large amount of them were veneficae; lamiae; werewolves; humans. A small number of hellsehers.

Their home. Their city—it was fucking destroyed.

Behind him, Max and the others were devising a plan, setting up

groups to split into to aid the districts that were still under demon attack.

They were gone within the minute, Reapers, Angels, and Devils vanishing in different directions, Cyra and Emilie going too.

And then it was just Darien, Malakai, Macen, and Brodie. The car wasn't far, but Darien felt like he couldn't get there fast enough.

He ran, the others following, bullets firing into dark alleys.

The back door of his car swung open. Erasmus stepped out, Mortifer perched on his shoulder. Concern was etched into both faces, human and Hob.

As Darien moved, he glanced down at Loren, watching and listening for her shallow breathing. His preoccupation with her was the reason why he didn't notice something was amiss until he was about a dozen feet from the vehicle.

The faint *click* of a gun's safety being lowered slowed his feet.

He could feel it—the target on the back of his head.

Darien froze, arms tightening around Loren. Black flooded his eyes as he attempted to rally his magic—

But the black went away as soon as it got there. His magic was still spent; there wasn't one drop left.

Malakai's voice tore through the night. "Brodie!" he barked. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Slowly, Darien turned. Once he was facing Brodie, he saw that his twin brother had a gun on him too.

Malakai was standing in the path of the guns, hands raised, eyes—all the black bled out of them—bolted wide. "Someone tell me what the fuck is going on!"

There was a look of maniacal delight on Brodie's face. He was looking at...at Loren, Darien realized. "She has the powers of the Well."

Darien's blood ran cold.

Loren stirred in his arms, a hum that sounded like she was coming to floating from her lips.

But her heart—it was still weak. Still nothing but a faint flutter.

Darien whispered, "Brodie."

Brodie tightened his grip on the gun. "How long were you planning on keeping her a secret, huh?" His words were ragged shouts that carried far. "*How long?*" he roared, the veins in his temples pulsing.

"I can explain," Darien tried.

Malakai was gaping in confusion. "What the fuck do you mean you can explain?" His head swivelled between them. "Is it true? Does *she* have the Well magic?" He waved a hand at Loren. Darien tightened his hold on her. "*Does she?*"

Darien couldn't find words. He had no idea what to say or do. He

was drained, and all he could do was hold onto Loren, praying they would make it out of here. That *she* would make it out of here.

She had to live.

*She* had to live.

"That was how she was able to seal the Veil," Macen cut in, his words for Malakai, who stared at Darien, rage and disbelief contorting his features. "How she was able to heal Darien. *She* is the girl everyone's been looking for."

"What's going on?" The sound of Loren's soft voice made Darien's knees weaken with relief. Relief—and a fresh wave of fear that sent his heart into a sprint.

Carefully, he set her on her feet and pulled her behind him, so his body was shielding hers. He might be able to protect her with his body, might be able to keep her safe now that he wasn't having to carry her.

Darien raised a hand in surrender, keeping the other arm gripping Loren, as he said to Malakai, "It's true. It's true, alright? I'm done lying to you. I was hired to hunt her down last fall. But I decided to dig deeper when I saw that she was human. She is *innocent*, Malakai. She does not deserve to be hunted like this. If she uses her magic, she will die—"

"You're a fucking liar!" Malakai exploded. He stepped closer, pointing a finger in Darien's face. "You lied. What happened to not keeping secrets, Darien? What happened to that?" His upper lip curled back over his teeth. "You two-timing son of a fucking bitch."

"It wasn't like that," Darien said, swallowing a wave of nausea. Loren gripped his arm, fingers fluttering. "I didn't mean it like that—"

Malakai tried to point around him—at Loren.

Darien hid her by angling his body. She was sagging against him, nearly falling down, her cold hands gripping his arm. So cold, he could feel the icy temperature through the tears in his bodysuit.

"She is what I need to heal Jewels," Malakai said, still pointing. The manic excitement sparking in his eyes made a sharp contrast with the rage marring his features and the black staining his cheeks. "She can cure her of the Tricking."

"We don't know that," Darien tried. "She hardly knows how to control her magic, Malakai. The only person she's ever healed is me. And the Widow told her that if she uses her magic, she will die."

"Another bullshit lie," Brodie spat.

"I'M NOT FUCKING LYING!" Darien bellowed, the words ripping through the night. He faced Malakai. "Malakai, *look* at her! She's practically dead on her feet. I need to get her to a hospital. *Please*. If you're willing to help me, I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"What about all the other promises you made?"

"I know," Darien squeezed out. He couldn't breathe. "I know, alright? I've been a shitty friend, okay? Just give me a chance to talk —"

"We're not fucking friends," Malakai spat. "*You're* not a friend. Friends don't lie, Darien."

"Malakai, please." The words were soft. Pleading. "I love her. I love her more than anything."

"And she's more important than my fucking sister? You expect me to step aside and just let you walk away?"

"If Loren could help Jewels without it costing her life, I would ask her to do it in a heartbeat, I swear it. But that's not the case. Didn't you see, Malakai? Didn't you see how I tried to stop her from saving *me*?" Darien jabbed a finger into his own chest. "*ME!*" he roared, the word shredding his throat. "I tried to stop her to prevent *this!*" He gestured to Loren, who nearly fell over, gripping his arm tighter. Her eyelids were slipping shut, her cheek pressed against his upper arm.

There was a flicker in the Reaper's features. The kind of flicker that told Darien he was making sense, that Malakai might be realizing he was telling the truth.

Darien took the moment and ran with it, words flying desperately from his mouth. "Malakai, please understand. I need to save her. I *need* to save her." His voice shifted into a sob. "I *need* her. More than I need air. I can't live without her. *Please*. Just let me get her to a hospital."

The rage on Malakai's face softened, but it wasn't enough.

Still, Darien tried, his voice a hoarse whisper, "Please."

Malakai drew a gun of his own. Took aim.

"Oh god." Darien's words were coated with defeat. He didn't want to have to do this, didn't want to have to fight them, and he feared he was outnumbered, his body too spent for any more conflict. The magic inside him wasn't there; it felt like a great void had swallowed it up, and he couldn't even summon his Sight. The only weapons he had left were empty, ammunition used up.

And Malakai's gun was pointing right at his head.

"Malakai, please."

"Kill him!" Brodie bellowed, the words like the crack of bullets in the night. "Kill him and let's take the girl, Malakai!" Soon, his brother was shouting too, goading Malakai on.

Darien shook his head, eyes on Malakai. "Please," he mouthed.

Malakai took the safety off his gun. "Fuck you, Darien," he gritted out. Darien saw the intent in his eyes, and he knew this was it.

One last time, he tried, "*Malakai—*"

*Bang. Bang.* Two shots rang through the night.

Darien's ears rang.

His head spun as he tried to make sense of what happened.

Two bodies fell.

Darien held his breath. Looked around, vision spinning.

Brodie and Macen had fallen. Their guns clattered to the ground. Blood seeped from bullet wounds, spreading into puddles that trickled into cracks in the sidewalk.

Malakai glared. Threw his gun aside, where it clattered in the middle of the road. Pointed a finger in Darien's face. "And fuck you again for making me choose!"

"Oh my god." Relief weakened Darien's muscles. He sank to his knees, drawing Loren down with him. He hugged her tight as he rocked back and forth, sobbing silently, his fingers buried in her soft hair, her head lolling against his shoulder.

"Darien." The name floated off Loren's lips in the weakest whisper.

There was something off about it. Something that put Darien on edge. Something that had him attempting to lift her head from his shoulder so he could read her face.

Something that had Malakai glancing at Darien with stark fear.

Loren's heart picked up to a sprint. The beats blended together, all of them so quick, the spaces between them so small, it sounded like a hummingbird's heart.

"Malakai," Darien mouthed. He didn't know what he was asking for, but he knew he needed help.

The beating of Loren's heart grew faint.

Darien held his breath. Listened.

The night was dead silent. He listened hard, but there was no sound, and the girl in his arms had gone limp as a ragdoll.

Loren's heart had stopped.

—

Loren wasn't breathing. Her chest was too still, her features too slack.

"Malakai," Darien panted. He laid Loren down on her back on the sidewalk. Erasmus rushed over, Mortifer clinging to the back of his neck. "Malakai, she's not breathing. Loren—she's not breathing! *She's not breathing!*"

The Reaper dropped to his knees on the other side of Loren's limp body. "Darien, I'm going to need you to do something for me. I'm going to need you to help me."

Darien was vaguely aware of Malakai speaking to him, but he stopped hearing words. Something was crushing his lungs flat. His vision darkened with unwelcome shadows, the colors of auras and energies bright and intrusive as a Surge swept in, grabbing every part of him and yanking him about like a puppet on strings.

“Malakai, help her—*please*,” Darien begged, his words running together. “Malakai, she’s not breathing. I can’t fucking see anything! *I can’t see—*”

“Darien.” Malakai’s voice cut into Darien’s choking panic. The Reaper’s eyes bored into his, intense and determined. “I’m going to need you to do something for me, okay?”

“Anything.” His tone was as desperate as he felt. For Loren, he would beg. Would give every part of himself up, would trade anything, so she could live. “Tell me what to do.”

“I’m going to begin chest compressions. And you—you’re going to pinch her nose and breathe into her mouth when I tell you to. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Can you do that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.”

He followed Malakai’s instructions, carefully pinching Loren’s nose and breathing into her mouth every time the Reaper told him to, hating himself that he was so blind and rendered so useless because of it. If he didn’t do this properly, if his Sight caused him to miss a beat, if Loren died because of him—

It was sheer power of will that forced his vision to clear, the black in his eyes fading to the edges of his vision like spilled ink.

He didn’t know a lot about CPR, but the look on Malakai’s face told him his worst fear was coming true.

“It’s not working,” Darien gritted out. “*It’s not working!*”

The fact that the Reaper said nothing, only continuing to do chest compressions, his full attention on Loren, told him everything.

Darien wasn’t sure what made him do it, what gave him the idea, but he was suddenly reaching into the pockets of his bodysuit. He patted and searched until he felt the bulge of the syringe. The one and only syringe he’d found in that tunnel.

Malakai didn’t miss a beat in trying to revive Loren, though his eyes locked on the iridescent liquid in the syringe.

“Hold on a sec.” Malakai’s words were a panted warning.

“Move.”

Malakai did.

Darien pulled down the zipper in the front of Loren’s bodysuit and ripped her shirt open from the collar down.

“Darien,” Malakai tried. “We don’t know what that’ll do.”

“I’m willing to chance it.” He wound his arm back and plunged the needle into her chest, right above her silent heart, and emptied the Life Clock into her body. He jerked his chin at Malakai. “Keep going.”

He did.

A dull glow began to spread at the injection site.

Malakai continued compressions.



With every pump of his hands, with every breath Darien blew into Loren's mouth, the magic of the Life Clock spread out to her shoulders and down her arms...her legs...all the way into the tips of her fingers and toes. The glow crawled up her neck, her face, until her whole body was tinted with teal light. Even her hair was a vivid green-blue.

When the glow finally faded, the teal dissipating, a clock was left in its place. Right above her heart. The heart that was still silent. Lifeless.

Five hours and fifty-nine minutes.

Then came a sound. The sweetest sound Darien had ever heard.

"Her heart," Malakai whispered.

Her heart had started again. But her eyes remained shut, her beautiful face slack.

Darien threw the needle aside. It clinked across the road and stilled against a storm drain. Quickly, he zipped the bodysuit back up and scooped Loren into his arms.

"We need to get her to a hospital," Darien said, throwing his head back to get the hair out of his face. "Can you drive us?" There was no way he was letting go of Loren.

"Of course, Dare." Malakai got to his feet. "That's not even a question. Want me to carry her?"

He made for the car, Erasmus stepping aside to let him by. "I'm good." He could see again, but barely.

He had to save her.

He *would* save her.

It was dark. Completely dark—she couldn't see a thing. Her surroundings were buoyant, as if she were floating in a body of water or drifting through space. She couldn't hear anything, her ears plugged as if by water, her head stuffed with wet sand.

She kept looking for light, kept listening for a voice, for anything that might tell her where to turn, how to get out of here. She had the vague sense that she should feel afraid, but her emotions were as numb as her body, and they did not respond to her thoughts.

It was peaceful here. The longer she floated in the darkness, the less she looked for light, the less she listened for voices. It wasn't long before she forgot whose voices she should be listening for, and why it was so important to look for light in the dark.

It wasn't long before she forgot how she'd ended up here.

It wasn't long before she couldn't remember who she was.

The darkness beckoned her into its grasp, the temptation to walk into it greater than any memory of light. Soon, it was the only thing she knew, the only thing that existed.

That was when she saw a tree. A tree of life.

Or was it death?

She moved toward it—toward the pool of teal water shimmering beneath a dome of aggressive roots.

Life. Death. She could no longer tell which was which.

Night had nearly ended. The Blood Moon was setting, but the city was far from peaceful.

Streets and buildings had been destroyed. Hundreds—thousands of lives had been lost. The hospital was teeming with people saying their goodbyes to family and friends who wouldn't survive their injuries.

This wasn't goodbye. Not for Darien. He hated goodbyes, and he'd be damned if he ever had to say it to the woman he loved.

He sat in a chair at Loren's bedside in the hospital, her limp hand in his. Her beautiful face was smooth and expressionless, her breathing barely detectable. There was no sound in the room aside from the beeping of the heartrate monitor and the humming of fluorescent lights.

"Loren." Darien's throat was so tight, he could barely squeeze the name past his lips. "I don't know if you can hear me... But—I hope you can." The longer he spoke, the harder it became to breathe. To think.

The faint beeping of the machine continued, the only sound that answered him. The beating of Loren's golden heart.

"I love you, Loren." There was such raw truth in the statement that he almost didn't recognize his own voice. His next words were thick and wobbling, and his eyes began to burn. "I'm so in love with you. None of us would be here right now if it weren't for you, and now you're here in this hospital...barely alive—" His breathing hitched, his free hand squeezing into a fist on his knee.

The cold white room disappeared with the shutting of his eyes. He focused on breathing for a few minutes, trying to slow his accelerated heartbeat to the beeping of the monitor, matching it to Loren's heart.

Darien leaned forward. Bowed his head. With his eyes still closed, he drew a rattling breath.

And then he went on to say the things he should've said to her, should've told her when he'd had the chance. Instead, he'd squandered his precious time with her, and now they were here. And it was too late.

"I realized I was in love with you that night I took you to see the stars. After I...after I fucked up, I went to fight at the Pit. All I wanted was to go home so badly, but I realized home wasn't a place anymore, it was wherever you were. That was when I knew—my life would never be the same without you.

“When I met you, Loren, when I sat across from you that day at Rook and Redding’s, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Instantly, I was...protective of you. Even if you would’ve refused my help, I don’t think I would’ve been able to stay away from you. You affected me in a way no one ever has. And as the days wore on, and I got to see all the vulnerable and beautiful parts of you, I didn’t just want to be your friend, I wanted to be your *best* friend. I wanted to be the first thing you thought of when you woke up and the last thing that crossed your mind before you fell asleep. Your laugh and your smile lit up a part of me that had been dark for so long. You brought light into my life, and even though I knew that I could never deserve you, I didn’t want to let you go. Even the thought of being separated from you made it difficult to breathe. I wanted you to let me love you. I wanted to give you the world, because you had become mine.” Tears wet his eyelashes and slipped down his cheeks. “I love you, Loren.”

When the last word trailed off into silence, the beeping of the machine swelled to a roar that grabbed hold of his already broken heart and crushed it into dust.

“Please,” he whispered, the word gruff and choked by tears. “Please wake her up. Don’t take her from me. *Please*. She’s all I’ve got.” She was his path to the light, his only shot at innocence, and if she was gone, if she left him here...

Darien opened his damp eyes. The words were out at last, but they brought him no relief.

Because the girl he loved was still asleep. She wasn’t here, and even though he didn’t know for certain, he had a feeling he was the only person hearing his words. His useless fucking words.

The words that weren’t enough. Not. Good. Enough.

Still, he clung to that small chance that she might hear him, wherever she was drifting.

“I’m sorry I never told you.” He traced the back of her delicate hand with his thumb. The soft scent of her—that cedar-and-rain fragrance that was the magic of the Arcanum Well—was nearly nonexistent. So was her aura, both of them fading away with the last of her life. The potent glow of rainbow and white light was nothing now but a tiny flame threatening to gutter out. “I want you to come back.” His throat was tight, and he couldn’t see, though for once in his life it wasn’t the Sight rendering him blind. He blinked more tears away, tasting the salt of them as they ran over his lips. He wiped at his nose with his other hand. His next words were sobs, broken up only by rasping breaths. “I’m crying like a child and you can’t even hear me. Love isn’t a good enough word to describe how I feel for you.”

There was no answer, no sign of movement. Her hand was so still,

it made him sick. His heart was breaking, and he couldn't take it anymore.

"Come back." The two words were barely audible. "Come back to me, sweetheart. Please."

But there was only silence. Her beautiful and vibrant energy that made him feel warm and happy and wanted and safe...it was gone. He'd never felt so cold in all his life.

Nor had he ever felt so horribly fucking alone.

---

Max slowed his pace as he neared Loren's room in Angelthene General Hospital, the other Devils walking on either side of him. The room Darien hadn't left since the moment he got here.

Ivy was the first to step forward. She walked heel to toe, edging around the corner and through the open doorway.

Max followed behind her, but his feet stilled at the sight of Darien—and the girl lying motionless on the bed, eyes shut, her right hand, so pale and limp, clasped between both of Darien's.

Darien, whose head was bowed, broad shoulders curled forward, elbows resting on his knees. He still wore the Fleet bodysuit, the black material grimy, rips everywhere. His hair hung in his face, the strands coated in ash, dust, and blood. Although he didn't turn, Max knew his friend could sense they were there. Nothing slipped by him.

"I'm having a Surge." Darien's deep voice was flat. It filled the room, the sound bringing Ivy to a halt several feet from his chair. She backed up a pace, but Max knew it was because Darien would want her to, and not because she was afraid of him.

When Darien spoke again, he kept his head bowed, not moving a muscle. "I need to get out of here." That voice was so emotionless. So *empty*. The sound of it sickened Max. When Tanner glanced at him, the hacker's face just as filthy as Max's felt, he knew he wasn't the only one who was feeling that way. Darien's next sentence was a whisper, hoarse and weak. "It isn't safe. I can't be around her."

Lace, who was inching through the doorway behind Max, stopped suddenly and backed up into the hallway. She leaned back against the wall beside the door and shut her eyes. With a shaking of her head, as if trying to rid herself of this reality, she raised her hands to her face and silently sobbed into her palms.

Enough. They'd all had enough.

Max was vaguely aware of Travis and Jack drifting down the hallway, heading toward the flatscreen television mounted on a wall by the desk, the news channel drawing them over.

It was Angelthene's news channel, the television broadcasting the

ruination of the city.

"We've got it, Darien," Max offered. "We'll look after her for however long you need."

Tanner opened his mouth to speak but closed it again, at a loss for words. His eyes were still red from crying in the tunnels.

The room fell into silence as they all stood there, not knowing what to say, desperate to fix this but not knowing how.

And then Travis came back. His eyes were wild with fear as he pushed past Max and entered the room, cheeks marked with inky streaks from all the Venom he'd used. "Blackbird is on fire."

Ivy went pale. The silence in the room thickened as everyone stopped breathing.

Max glanced at Darien just in time to see the muscles in his back and shoulders bunch up with tension.

"It's all over the news," Travis breathed. "Cops are on the scene, firefighters—"

"Trav," Max warned.

Travis's throat bobbed. Understanding entered in his eyes as he looked Darien's way.

That understanding was replaced with regret.

Darien was still as a statue. Although his back was tensed up, his hands gently cupped Loren's, his fingers never tightening.

Ivy's face had transformed into a cold mask of pain. She marched up to her cousin, every movement stiff, her body visibly trembling.

She shoved Travis in the chest. "*Why would you say that?*" she wailed, the tears in her eyes glimmering like gemstones under the fluorescent lights. "Why would you say that, Trav?" She shoved him again. "*Why?*"

"I'm sorry—"

"*Look at him!*" Her voice was raw, and it broke in several places.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking!"

But Darien was already moving. He was up out of the chair, walking quickly across the room.

Max stepped out of the way. As Darien passed by, Max could feel his aura. It was an awful blend of rage, sorrow, guilt, and heartbreak—heartbreak the likes of which he'd never felt, not in all his life. It nearly winded him, nearly buckled his knees. If he was feeling this horrible simply by catching a hint of Darien's aura, he loathed to consider what was going on in his friend's mind. His heart.

Utterly helpless, Max watched Ivy hurry after her brother. Hospital staff kept out of Darien's way, a few of them casting furtive glances at that shredded bodysuit. That Venom- and tear-streaked face.

Darien didn't spare them a glance. And he didn't turn, not even with Ivy calling his name—not until he got to the elevator.

Just as the doors were sliding open, Darien looked over Ivy's head, his eyes—black as a moonless night—locking with Max's. "Don't let Loren out of your sight."

And then he stepped into the elevator. The doors slid shut.

Ivy stood near those elevators for a long time, her shoulders heaving with labored breaths.

"Babe." Jack spoke softly, every word chosen carefully. "Let him go."

Ivy whispered, "I'm going after him."

Lace straightened from the wall. "Ivy," she croaked.

But Ivy was already gone, disappearing into the first elevator whose doors slid open.

When Max looked over his shoulder, at the girl lying on the bed, her face smooth and peaceful in a way he found almost eerie, he feared not just for her life, but also for Darien's.

Because he understood that if Loren died, Darien died too. Maybe not physically. Maybe not from his heart ceasing to beat, but he would die all the same.

Max had known Darien his whole life. Never once had he dared to love, not until Loren came along. When Elsie passed away, she had taken with her the spark that was keeping Darien going, the spark that symbolized his future, his innocence. And when she left, Darien had lost it all, his knees bowing to the sheer force of Randal's influence, causing him to cave and become so many of the things he hated.

But he'd fought it these recent years. Darien had fought hard not to become a mirror image of the man he hated, and in doing so, he was careful to keep his emotions in check, never bending to the four-letter word he viewed as a weakness, ending nearly every relationship that drifted into his life before it could become something more than mindless and heartless fucking.

Until Loren came along. Loren had done the one thing no other woman who'd come before her had been able to do.

She had navigated the labyrinth of his heart. Taken his hand and led him onto a new path, the same path he'd strayed away from when his mother had passed away. He'd opened up his heart to her, had dared to fall in love, dared to dream, and if she was gone, if she died right here in this hospital, there would be no going back.

If Darien lost Loren, Max would lose Darien.

They would all lose Darien.

—

Blackbird was up in flames.

Darien felt like his soul had extracted itself from his body as he

lurched out of the car, leaving the door open behind him, and staggered across the street, pushing through the crowds that had gathered to watch. Cops and MPU agents had the area secured. Firetrucks were present, but they were rendered useless. This wasn't the work of a regular fire. There was nothing any of them could do, no way of putting it out.

It was the work of raw, unfiltered magic. The destruction it spawned could not be contained by anything.

The building would burn. All of it would burn. And when the flames finally quieted, there would be nothing left of the restaurant. The spellwork would keep it from spreading beyond the skyscraper that housed the restaurant, but as for Blackbird itself, there was no hope for it.

This truth nearly pushed him to his knees. But he kept moving, every step swift and determined.

Darien had made it to the front of the crowd and was heading straight for the entrance of the skyscraper—warped and shattered—when a blast of heat and light came from inside the building.

People screamed and staggered back.

But Darien only pushed forward, even as a sweltering wave sent sweat prickling across his skin. The temperature seeped through his bodysuit, the force of the blast blowing his hair back.

Hands restrained him. Gripped his shoulders. Yanked on him. People were speaking, but he couldn't hear a word.

Until several officers stepped in his path.

"We're going to have to ask you to step back."

"This is my mother's restaurant." His voice sounded far away, as if his ears were plugged. He was sweating bullets. He couldn't breathe.

This was a fucking nightmare.

His whole life was a nightmare.

"You can't be here."

*"Don't touch me."* He ripped his arm out of an officer's hold.

His magic awakened, the force of it—invisible again, now that the Veil had been sealed shut—lashing out of him like whips, sending all the men crashing to the glass-covered sidewalk.

But soon more hands were grabbing onto him. More people were pulling him back. More people were shouting.

He was shouting too. He didn't know what he was saying—what words were coming out of his mouth. It might've been nothing, but it felt like everything. His magic knocked people back, along with his fists. His knuckles struck noses and jaws, breaking them upon contact.

A set of hands pinioned his wrists behind his back. They were strong—but not strong enough.

Darien tore his hands free. Smashed his forehead into the nose of



the closest officer, shattering the bone, and tripped another.

That was when he heard his sister's voice.

"Darien!" she wailed. "Stop!"

He froze. Stopped fighting.

"Darien! Please, you have to stop." She stepped in front of him, forcing him to look her in the eyes.

Behind her, his mother's restaurant continued to burn. Within minutes, it would be gone. It would all be gone.

Another thing he couldn't prevent. Another thing he couldn't save.

"Please, Darien," Ivy begged. "*Please.*" She was standing in front of him, head tipping back as she tried to meet his eyes, her hands fisting the chest of his bodysuit. "It's not worth it."

"Someone fucking did this." He pointed at the building as another burst of fire swept through the window frames, turning the whole street in the Financial District sweltering. "This was no accident, Ivy."

"You have to let it go."

"I can't fucking let it go."

More officers approached. Shouted.

Ivy whipped her head around to face them. "Just give us a damn second, already!" she screamed. Her eyes found Darien's again. "I know it hurts, okay?" Tears streamed down her face. "I know it hurts, Darien. It hurts for me too. It hurts for me too—it does. But you have to let it go. Please." She looked behind him—over his shoulder. "Wait. Hold on."

He was vaguely aware of a different officer tugging his hands behind his back. Cold metal dug through the torn sleeves of his bodysuit as he was handcuffed.

This time, Darien didn't fight. He was drained. There was nothing left in him—no fight, no will. Nothing.

"Wait!" Ivy latched onto his arm with trembling fingers. She peered around him at the officers, eyes wild with fear. "What are you doing? What are you doing? Where are you taking him?"

"It's okay," Darien said flatly. It wasn't okay, but he hated seeing her upset. He'd done this. Once again, he'd screwed up.

"*Darien!*" Ivy sobbed, his name shouted out on a raw and broken breath. She whirled on the officers. "Please, don't! You don't understand! This is our mother's restaurant—he's just upset. Please!"

"Ivy." Darien spoke softly. Quietly. "It's okay."

The officers pulled him away. Dragged him toward a cruiser, blue and red lights flashing.

"Wait." Ivy followed, swiping at her cheeks with gloved fingers. To the officers, she shouted, "Do whatever you need to do, just please don't hurt him!"

Above the noise, the roaring thoughts in his head, Darien barely

recognized the sound of Finn's gravelly voice coming from behind him.

"I got this." The warlock stepped up to Ivy. Ivy, who was still sobbing. Shaking.

So many people he'd broken. So many people he'd wrecked.

"I'll make sure he's okay," Finn said. To the other officers on the scene, Finn barked, "Detective Finn Solace." He flashed his badge. "I'll take him down to the station."

The others let go.

Finn grabbed him by the upper arm. "Let's go."

Darien allowed Finn to lead him to a black sedan, the back seats separated from the front with metal bars. He sensed Ivy watching, but he didn't turn.

"Get in," Finn said.

Darien resisted shattering Finn's nose with his forehead as he got in the sedan, eyes shooting hatred at the warlock who'd fucked him for weeks, leading him on a wild goose chase to detain Gaven.

Finn didn't shut the door. He lingered, glancing back at the restaurant, his closed mouth twitching as he searched for words. "I know you hate me right now."

"Is it that easy to tell?" Darien's voice was deadly calm.

"Turn around."

Darien shifted on the seat so his back was facing Finn. Keys jingled as Finn unlocked the cuffs.

"Turn back around," Finn said. Darien did. Finn cuffed his hands again, in front of him this time instead of behind his back. "This'll make it more comfortable for you."

Darien smirked. "How very kind of you."

The sound of boots clicking on pavement rose above the din of the crowds and the roaring of the fire consuming what was left of Blackbird.

"Wait!" Ivy's voice floated through the night. "Finn, wait."

Finn paused, hand poised to shut the door.

Ivy lurched to a stop near the car. Looked Darien in the eyes. "Mom loved you," she panted. "She loved you, Darien. No building is ever going to take that away. Do you understand me?"

He had no words, so he said nothing. He was empty inside, and he couldn't remember how to breathe.

"She loved you," Ivy said again. "Blackbird was just a building." But even as she said it, her eyes filled with fresh tears, and her mouth wobbled. She flattened her right hand over her heart. "Mom's in here. She's not in there." She waved that hand at the burning building. Choked down a sob. Faced him again. Whispered, "She never was."

Finn stepped between them. "We have to go."

Ivy backed up. “Will you make sure he’s okay?”

“I’ll take care of this.”

The door slammed shut, separating him from his sister. When Finn made for the driver’s-side door, Darien met Ivy’s pained gaze through the glass, distorted by a layer of condensation and frost that had yet to melt.

“I love you,” she mouthed.

Darien watched her face—ghostly pale and lined with defeat, her cheeks streaked with tears—through the foggy window.

This was just like the night when his mom died. When officers had arrived on the scene, they’d found two teenaged kids standing horrified on the sidewalk, one of those kids suffering from a Surge, his screams more animal than hellseher. They’d needed to pry his fingers off his mother’s lifeless body.

He’d fought them. He’d fought hard. But in the end, the officers had won. After loading him into a police cruiser, they had taken him somewhere safe, a place where he couldn’t hurt anyone, his Surge rendering him unpredictable. Violent. A potential threat. He’d watched Ivy back then too, until distance had swallowed her up.

And he watched her now, just as he had back then.

Until distance swallowed her up.

—

“We’ll find out who did this.” Finn’s voice cut through the quiet of the sedan as he drove through the Financial District, toward the precinct.

Where he sat in the back of the car, legs spread, one foot behind each of the front seats, Darien’s mouth twitched with a humorless smile. “You won’t find out a goddamn thing.”

Finn kept his eyes on the road, red and blue lights oscillating across the pavement.

The night was almost over, but Darien was far from relieved. His night was still going, the promise of dawn swallowed up.

It wasn’t coming. No light was coming.

“I wanted to apologize,” Finn began. “I know I lied. I know it was wrong. But I didn’t know how else to get your help. I wanted revenge. I failed to protect my son—failed to protect *all* those kids. Lost my wife because of it. Nearly lost my job.” Finn shook his head in disgust. “I didn’t know how else to deal with the nightmare my life had become.”

“Nightmare,” Darien scoffed. “I’m not one to compare scars, Finn.” He turned his head to look out the window at the palm trees and buildings zipping by. “But you have no idea what a nightmare is.”

Silence. And then Finn said, “One day, when you’re a father, you

might understand why I did it.”

“I’ll never be a father.” No, he would never be a father. His one shot at that elusive future was currently fighting for her life in a hospital bed after being dealt a hand of cards she didn’t deserve.

All this for the prospect of living forever; for reaching levels of magic never before reached. The dream of one fucking lunatic by the name of Erasmus Sophronia had led to the deaths of hundreds of people, maybe even thousands, Darien didn’t know. Erasmus’s history was a dark one that bled back thousands of years, and they hadn’t even reached the tip of it. Nor did Darien wish to.

They were nearing the precinct now. He would have to spend the rest of this gods-awful night behind bars, while the girl he loved lay unconscious in that cold hospital. Alone.

“You know what the most fucked up thing about this is, Finn?”

Finn wouldn’t meet his eyes in the rear-view mirror.

Darien leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, the chains on his handcuffs jingling.

“The most fucked up thing,” Darien said, “is that I would’ve done it for you anyway. If you had just told me what happened to your boy, I would’ve done it. I would’ve jumped at the chance to help you, Finn. You did it for your family, but you didn’t think twice about mine.” He sat back again. Flexed his thighs as he readjusted on the hard seat. Stared at Finn in the mirror. Finn, who still wouldn’t meet his eyes. Goddamn coward. “Putting my family in danger is a guaranteed way to turn me into your enemy. Congratulations.”

Darien didn’t say anything else for the rest of the ride. He stared out the window as that crackling rage inside him died out, leaving nothing behind but an empty pit that threatened to consume him.

In the precinct, Darien sat on the bench that was mounted to the far wall of the holding cell. His head was bowed, and his hands were clasped between his knees. He could feel the other prisoners who were all crammed behind the same bars watching him with prying eyes, all of them giving him a wide berth, but he paid them no mind.

It had taken nearly ten officers to get him in here. In the end, they had only succeeded because he had let them. He was tired of fighting useless battles.

He would fight the one that mattered when the time arrived.

A low whistle had Darien's head slowly turning to the left. Several men were watching him, clustered together in a tight group like flies feeding off the same piece of shit. It was the werewolf with the tattoos on his face who'd whistled—the piece of shit the others fed off of.

"You're one of them Devils," the guy said, the silver fillings in his teeth glinting in the fluorescent lights droning above their heads.

Darien held back a smirk. "Yeah, I'm one of them Devils."

The wolf failed to pick up on his mocking tone, the fucking idiot, making him as stupid as he looked. "You guys kill for fun?"

"We kill for money," Darien replied. Although it was quiet, his deep voice carried far. The attention of every person in the holding cell was fixed on him. "The fun is just a bonus." An empty smile that was more like a baring of teeth spread across Darien's face.

"We kill for power," the wolf said. "Status. I'm thinking if we killed you, it'd get us a whole lot of both." He nudged the warlocks and wolves on either side of him, who nodded in agreement, muttering unintelligibly. The lead wolf thought it through in the half a brain he possessed, those silver fillings showing again as he slid his tongue across the front of his teeth.

Darien didn't look away or blink—a predator in the wild, facing down another who believed they were tough until someone tougher came along. When it came down to it, they were all just animals.

"Nah." The wolf waved an inked hand in dismissal. "You're not worth my time."

Slowly, Darien turned his head so he was facing forward again. He stared out through the bars at the peace officers; two were standing near the far wall, while the third pretended to look busy on the lone computer in the room. It was the third one that met his stare—by accident, Darien knew—before busying himself with the mouse and

keyboard, fingers striking the keys.

Darien closed his eyes and bowed his head. He felt the inky shade of hellseher magic rush into the whites, swallowing them whole, followed by the irises. The Sight caused all of the senses in his body to triple in strength, making him hyperaware of the boisterous male voices and the clacking of the keyboard at the desk; the reek of perspiring bodies and cheap cologne and deep-fried pastries.

The voices were the first to go.

Darien kept his eyes closed as his magic snapped every neck in the holding cell. Bodies crumpled to the cement floor, fleshy thuds carrying through the room.

The peace officers were next, but the spells were in the way.

One of those officers—the one at the desk—had even less of a brain than the werewolf with the face tattoos. He rushed forward with a shout, gun raised, and slid open the door to the cell, metal bars rattling.

The spells fell away, leaving the path clear. The other two officers screamed at him to shut the door. Darien sensed their movements as they lunged across the room, ripping guns from holsters—

Every officer was dead in half a second.

And Darien still hadn't opened his eyes.

After their hearts had stopped, he continued to sit there, eyes still shut. He didn't think. He didn't feel. He was vaguely aware of the alarm sounding in the building, red lights flashing on the walls, but what should've been a warning to flee felt more like a lullaby. It kept his mind quiet, its wailing preventing unwelcome thoughts from invading the peace he'd acquired from releasing pent-up magic and rage. Now that his soul was no longer swollen with them, he could breathe a little easier, but he knew it wouldn't last long. The weight would return, as it always did. Only now, it was heavier than before. So heavy.

Sometime later, he opened his eyes and rose to his feet. He walked out of the cell and through the room, stepping over bodies, grabbing his belongings—keys, jewelry, weapons, phone—on the way out.

He had just reached the door when a broad-shouldered warlock with tan skin rounded the corner. "Cassel—" He froze, taking in the people lying dead on the floor, their necks grotesquely twisted. Finn's throat bobbed. "What did you do?"

"You're going to fix this." Darien's voice was so calm, so smooth, he almost didn't recognize it. "You're going to erase any record that I was here, and you're going to blame these deaths on someone else. Got it?"

Finn was staring wide-eyed at the wreckage behind him.

Darien repeated, "Got it?"

When Finn's eyes flicked to his, Darien knew he understood what he was saying. He owed him—big time. For the shit he and his Devils had been put through, Finn owed them so much more than what he was asking for. But this was a good start.

"Got it." The look on Finn's face suggested the words tasted like ashes to him, but he said nothing more.

He sidled out of Darien's way.

Darien took a step. And then another. This night felt like a dream. A living nightmare.

He wished he would wake up.

Finn's voice floated down the hallway. "Take a left, two rights, then another left."

Darien turned around.

Finn's back was facing him. He stayed that way the whole time as he spoke. "It's the safest way out," Finn muttered. "No one will be looking for you there."

Darien didn't say anything. He left, not knowing if he would see Finn again after tonight, but also not caring.

As he walked out into the streets of a broken and corrupt Angelthene, he wondered if he would ever make it back.

Not to the precinct, but to the person he was before.

“Her heartbeat is getting stronger.”

Darien didn't turn to the sound of Doctor Atlas's statement. He was slumped in the chair beside Loren's bed in Angelthene General, booted feet kicked out before him.

Two days. Two days had passed since that night Loren had fallen into a coma, and Darien had stayed here the whole time. Not sleeping. Not drinking. Not eating. Barely breathing. After leaving the precinct, he'd stopped at Hell's Gate to shower and get a hold on his rage. Once he'd managed to muzzle it, he'd come straight here.

“What does that mean?” Darien said. He kept his tired eyes on Loren's face. She was so beautiful, even now. “Will she wake up soon?”

There was a hesitation. And then, “It means she's fighting.”

Fighting. Loren was fighting, but that didn't mean she was winning.

Darien had managed to keep his emotions in check since coming here, but now, there was a burning in his chest. His throat. The space behind his eyes was scalding, and his lungs were constricted, as if someone had punched a fist through his chest and grabbed hold of them, squeezing them tight, pulverizing them.

He drew a shaky breath that did nothing to ease the burning. “Is there anything I can do?”

The rustle of papers that drifted through the room suggested Doctor Atlas was carrying a clipboard. “She needs to find her way back on her own,” she said softly.

“If there's something that I can do to help her come back, I need you to tell me. There is no limit to what I would give for her.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted with empathy. Darien knew Doctor Atlas meant well, but the shift only made it even harder for him to breathe. “I understand, Darien,” she said. “I'll keep you informed.”

He rose to his feet. Walked to the side of the bed. The heartrate monitor was beeping, indicating life, but this wasn't living.

It wasn't living.

Darien brushed a careful hand across her brow, moving stray tendrils of golden hair aside, and pressed a kiss to Loren's forehead.

Her skin was so cold. So pale. The sight of her made Darien sick to his stomach. He missed his lively girl. The one who always blushed



when she was around him, whose smile could light up a room. The girl with the ocean eyes and the heart of gold. The one who'd taken his hand and led him to the path of light, after he'd drifted for so many years on dark side streets with no purpose or direction.

Darien turned and walked out of the room.

As he passed Doctor Atlas, who stepped aside to let him through, he slowed. He didn't look at her when he spoke. "I'll be back later."

He knew that Jack and Travis were out in the parking lot; they'd called him to let him know they were here to watch Loren for him for several hours. But they were waiting for him to walk out the front doors, giving him the space they knew he needed.

Darien would be back. He would be back before nightfall. Loren wouldn't spend a single night in this hospital without him.

He was halfway down the hallway when his phone started buzzing in the pocket of his jacket. The last thing he wanted right now was to talk to anyone, but he took it out as he neared the elevator, not bothering to check the screen as he answered. "Yeah?"

"Roman called." It was Max.

Darien stopped walking. He hadn't heard from his cousin in...shit, nearly a year. "What did he say?"

—

Where he stood in the wreckage of Blackbird 88 Above, Darien forced himself to breathe, the smell of smoke and magic singing his nose and throat. A warm wind was tearing through the jagged and empty window frames, stirring up the debris that crunched beneath his boots with the slightest shift of his weight.

There was hardly anything left of the restaurant his mother had loved. It had been so thoroughly destroyed by the hands of magic that what little remained was nothing but rubble. Hunks of stone and charred wood. Shattered wine bottles and champagne flutes. Chewed bits of piping and warped metal. Melted silverware and bits of burnt tablecloths, once white and pristine.

Such a beautiful thing—gone. And for what? A game of hatred and revenge that had nothing to do with the woman who'd loved this place, who used to dine here and get drunk off the sight of all the stars out the wall of windows. A woman who'd died long before this game had begun.

Darien walked across the long room, toward where the bar had once stood, past the area where he and Loren had sat together for dinner, when he'd learned a million things about her and still hadn't felt like he'd learned enough. The floor was covered with so much debris, it made walking nearly impossible. Or maybe it was the

emotion squeezing his lungs in a fist that made staying on his feet difficult.

He paused by the bar, a mess of shattered reflective glass catching his attention. Among the glass was a ring.

Darien stooped and picked it out of the rubble, rolling it around in his palm. With his thumb, he rubbed the black ash off the surface of the stone, revealing the color underneath.

Green. An emerald.

He stared at it for a long time, wind howling through the building.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He retrieved it without taking his eyes off the emerald, rolling it around in his other hand.

Darien swiped his thumb across the screen and lifted the phone to his ear. "Yeah."

"Darien, it's me," Ivy replied. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He studied the emerald. Thinking. Always thinking. "Why?"

"I saw your car at Blackbird. If you need me, Darien—"

"I'm fine, Ivy. Besides, I have somewhere I need to be." Someone he needed to visit. Something he needed to try.

"As long as you're sure," she pressed.

"I'm positive."

Yeah, he was positive. Positive he knew exactly who this belonged to, and what he needed to do to settle the score. The game of hatred and revenge would continue for a little while longer. He wasn't a quitter, nor was he a loser. And when someone fucked with something he cared about, they paid the price.

He ended the call and put his phone back in his pocket, along with the ring.

And then he stood, taking one last look at his mother's restaurant.

Seeing the debris spread around him, the ruins of a once beautiful place, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of loss. He worried he'd already forgotten all the important details that had made this place unique, and he feared he might never remember them properly again.

This restaurant was now nothing but a memory, and he hadn't had the time to prepare for it. Like most things in life, he'd taken it for granted, believing it would always be there.

He walked out, leaving Blackbird behind, and continued down the path that his foolish and hopeful self had promised he would one day break away from.

The path of darkness, moving away from the light.

Darien stood outside the Chalk Door, staring at its rough surface. In the late afternoon sunlight, the soft white limestone marking the rock took on a yellow hue that shimmered like a spiderweb.

His hands were hanging at his sides, the left palm cut open. The drip of blood striking the lush grass was the only sound in the area, the chirping of birds having faded away the moment he'd thrown the coin into the pool of stagnant water. Darien didn't feel the sting of the wound as it worked to knit itself together. He felt nothing. Not anymore.

Angelthere's old familiar sun had come out to bake the city. With the Veil sealed shut, the citizens were well on their way to healing. No more sick people. No more animals falling dead. No more blood rain or frosted windows or iced-over bodies of water.

Today was day two. The second day Loren was trapped in her mind, kept alive by machines. Two days too many.

No more. He refused to sit back and watch while those days turned into weeks. Months. Maybe even longer—who knew.

He refused to do it.

The Chalk Door groaned open. The atmosphere within crackled with fervent curiosity. The Pale Man was eager to see who'd come to visit; whose blood tasted of power, darkness, and rage.

Darien stepped forward and pushed open the door, leaving a smear of red on the stone. The scent of summer wine and sun-warmed fruit settled around him in a sugary haze, but unlike most of the Pale Man's visitors, he was unaffected by it. It was nothing but an irritation to Darien, an unwanted bit of pollen floating around him.

The Pale Man wasn't the monster today. *He* was.

As he stepped inside, he sensed the creature watching him from somewhere deep in its gilded habitat. Flowers of all colors peppered every inch of the walls. Their petals were peeled open wide, the insides emitting a haze of gold flecks that clung to Darien's skin and hair.

Darien walked deeper. He called upon his magic, using its immense force to keep the door from shutting him inside. That door groaned and shuddered in defiance, but it didn't close.

*Who's here?* The Pale Man's ancient voice slithered over the walls.

"You know who I am," Darien replied out loud, his words echoing sharply. "If you comply, I don't see a need to kill you."

A rustling came from a bend up ahead, followed by the clack of bones or rocks knocking together.

*You?* the Pale Man hissed in disbelief. *Kill me?*

“I can taste your fear,” Darien said, black engulfing his eyes as he read the Pale Man’s aura. It wasn’t one he could easily pinpoint, wasn’t one he could see the shape of behind walls. But he could feel it, taste it, sense it. It was muddy and flickering, and its flavor was of rotting fruit and decay. “Are you going to answer the questions I have? Or shall I tear you limb from limb and make you beg a little first?”

There was a pause. The Pale Man’s aura took on a peculiar note, one that suggested he was impressed by Darien’s boldness. As a creature of near immeasurable power, the Pale Man was seldom presented with a real challenge, so when he was, he considered it a treat. The rare kind worthy of savoring.

*Devil of Hell’s Gate*, the thing hissed. *What would you like to know?*

Darien could tell that the creature was merely pretending to cooperate. The Pale Man still pushed at the door with his power, trying to shut it, his hunger a tangible thing that colored his invisible aura with the sharp tones of malice and greed.

“A human girl came to see you a couple weeks ago.” The door tried to shut again, the lurching of the stone causing the sunlight to dance across the walls and floor. Every time it moved, half of Darien’s face was cast in shadow cool as winter’s touch, the other in light warm as Angelthene in high summer. Darien held firm, and his magic did not break as he continued, “You told her something. Something that scared her. I want to know what it was.”

A minute passed before the Pale Man spoke, and despite his resolve, Darien felt a chill skitter across the back of his neck.

*The Devil will die*, said the monster. *When a red sun is high in another sky, the Devil will die.*

The chill faded, leaving nothing in its place but icy resolve. After everything that’d happened with Loren and his family...after everything they’d gone through on Kalendae, walking away from that event victorious only to be hurled right into another battle for life weeks later...

Darien found that he would welcome the creature’s omen, would dare it to happen, just so he could feel alive again. It was better than an omen involving Loren and her precious life. Anything but that.

Darien said, “How will I die?”

The Pale Man stopped fighting, stopped making the door shudder, as if finally accepting that today’s visitor wasn’t prey.

*By choice.* The Pale Man took delight in his words, an evil smile filling every one to bursting. *You must die, Devil of Hell’s Gate. You*

*must die, so that she can live.*

## EPILOGUE

*Caliginous on Silverway*  
*Yveswich, State of Ker*

“I know you’re watching me.”

Roman Devlin stood completely still, staring at his reflection in the elevator. His ears popped as the platform shot to the top floor of the skyscraper, leaving his soul down below. Ochre eyes blazed through the glass, the uncommon shade just as unnerving as the depthless black that frequently swallowed them whole. The threat simmering in his stare formed a sharp contrast with the cheerful music tinkling through the speaker, some old tune birthed from the days of black-and-white motion picture shows, an era the world would never see again.

He’d ridden this elevator so many times that he didn’t need to call upon his Sight to know there was a security camera hidden behind the mirror. It was pointing straight at him, red light flashing as it recorded.

A cruel smile curved his mouth, deepening the small scar by the left corner. He stepped up and leaned his forehead against the cool glass, inked hands hanging loosely at his sides.

“You’re watching me because you think I’m sick,” he whispered, breath fogging up the mirror. He shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were black. With the aid of the Sight, his reflection melted away to reveal the hidden camera—red light blinking, just as he’d suspected. “And you’re right: I am sick. Twisted. Rotten to my very core. But let me tell you a secret.” He stared at the red light. Wet his lips. Tilted his head a little. “That’s why I come here... To better myself... To *help* myself. Which is why you should stop. Recording. *Me.*” He thudded a fist on the glass, causing the platform to quake as it slowed to a stop on the highest floor.

The doors slid open with a muffled *ding*, and the red light on the camera shut off.

Roman stepped back. Blinked away the Sight. He tilted his head, staring at his reflection with gold eyes again, taking in the small tattoo marking the skin below the left. A skull of shadow, black ink oozing through it. The mark of the Shadowmasters. The mark of his house.

With the bloodthirsty grin of a shark that caused the ink on his cheekbone to stretch, he ran a hand through his tousled hair—dark

brown with a hint of gold, a feature his mom used to tell him made his eyes pop—and turned on a heel, angling his wiry body to slip through the doors of the elevator as they slid shut with a hiss.

A pretentious sign written in a loopy font on a wall of slatted wood greeted him for the fifth night in a row. *Caliginous On Silverway*, it said.

Roman's combat boots slapped on the spotless floors as he made his way to the enormous curved desk up ahead, where a redheaded witch sat in a leather chair, cell phone in manicured hand. The stick of a lollipop poked through a puckered red mouth, the rounded candy bulging against her cheek. If she would quit throwing herself at him every time he came here, he might appreciate the sight a little more. But she was too easy. Roman liked the chase, even now—even in his late twenties with no sign of his aging slowing down.

"Slacking again, Tanya?" Roman said, husky voice booming against the vaulted ceiling.

Tanya set her phone on the desk and pulled the sucker out of her mouth. The room smelled of artificial cherry flavoring and the cool peppermint mist spiraling from the conical diffuser on the desk, a collection of salt lamps spread around it. "Back again so soon?"

"Isn't there a policy that prevents employees from making snide comments about their clients?" He stepped up to the high desk and folded his arms on the surface.

Tanya plunked the lollipop into the wastebin. "It's not a snide comment, Roman. It's merely an observation." She grabbed a coil of keys off the desk and stood, chair swiveling with her departure. "Most of our clients only come here once per week, if that."

"Maybe you should create a loyalty program then," Roman said, following her as she rounded the desk and led the way down a wide hall, stilettos clicking out a rapid staccato. "Give me a few free sessions instead of charging me out the ass."

She snickered. "I didn't know a Darkslayer's pay was something to complain about." The sleek fabric of her black pencil skirt whispered with every stride.

"It's not. I'm just cheap. I don't buy dinner before I fuck, and I would rather steal when given the opportunity than pay."

A chill prickled across Tanya's arms; Roman could sense it. He could sense everything. "I'm not sure you should be telling me that," she said.

"What are you going to do? Call the MPU on me?"

She cast him a glance he couldn't read. "I think you'd have to be holding a gun to my head for me to do that."

"Don't tempt me. Some people are into that, you know."

"I can't say I've tried it before, but I'm always open to new things."

“If chamber number seven is available, I’ll take it.”

“You’re our only client tonight.” A look thrown over her shoulder revealed that her eyes were hooded with heavy lids. With a wetting of her glamourised lips, she told him, “You can have whatever you like.” Roman didn’t miss the subtle invitation.

“Then I’ll have chamber number seven.”

It was the last door on the right. Tanya stepped up to the panel on the wall and flattened her hand on the scanner. The door shot open with a hiss, leaving a wall of invisible spells in its place, programmed to allow only the paying client to pass through.

The room was a lightless anti-gravity chamber made of jet-black adamant, the glass-like rock broken up here and there by forks of weeping cristala. The darkness choking the interior was the kind that blinded, the ceiling and floor so far away that the chamber seemed to stretch on forever, no end in sight. Just like the night sky.

Tanya turned to face him. “No keys or jewelry. Cover up any conduit tattoos.” She eyed him from head to toe, red lips fluttering with a smile. “I think you know the rules.”

Roman shed his brown leather jacket and hung it on a hook by the door. The incessant buzzing of his phone in the right pocket faded away as he focused, blood thrumming in his veins, magic clawing at his skin. It was probably another of the endless calls from the other Shadowmasters or houses in the city, nobody willing to leave him alone long enough for him to catch his breath. If he was really unlucky, the person calling was his father, who would give him an earful as soon as he left the chamber. Sometimes, Roman wasn’t sure which would be the death of him first: his father or this city.

“If you need anything, use the intercom,” Tanya said before taking her leave. She knew better than to linger.

Roman removed his jewelry—bracelet, rings, the single chain glinting in the hollow of his throat—and placed it on the shelf. His phone was still buzzing. Another call, maybe. Or several text messages coming through without any space between them.

He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. As he stepped through the spells cloaking the doorway, his Surge began to back off. Nearly twelve months of this, and it was finally getting the hint.

He closed his eyes, held his arms out at his sides, and fell forward into the chamber, the zero gravity turning him boneless, sending him tumbling head over feet. It felt like floating in a pool, but without the feel of water on his skin.

The door slid shut, sealing off every trace of the light in the hallway, leaving him bathing in a buoyant darkness that was infinite. The feeling was soon tripled by his magic vacating his system, the barrage of power that his body—his magic’s vessel—could barely



contain on a good day lighting up the chamber with galaxies.

Tiny pinpricks of silver light that were like stars; hazy spirals and different colored orbs; cosmic dust and constellations. All floating within reach.

This was his quiet time. His place of refuge.

His own galaxy.

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## DARKSLAYING HOUSES OF ANGELTHENE

### THE SEVEN DEVILS

**Darien Cassel**— Head of Hell's Gate and lead Darkslayer in Angelthene. Formed the Seven Devils when he was nineteen. Son to Randal Slade and Elsie Cassel/Emberley Slade. Twin brother to Ivyana Cassel.

**Maximus Reacher**—Second to Darien Cassel. Brother to Maya Reacher. Has been friends with Darien since they were kids.

**Travis Devlin**— Cousin to Darien Cassel. Also known as the Devlin Devil. Younger brother to Roman Devlin. Grew up in the city of Yveswich.

**Jack Steele**— Husband to Ivyana Cassel. The newest member of the Seven Devils.

**Ivyana Cassel**— Twin sister to Darien Cassel, born seven minutes after Darien. Daughter to Randal Slade and Elsie Cassel/Emberley Slade. She is married to Jack Steele.

**Tanner Atlas**— Hacker for the Seven Devils. Son to Doctor Atlas. He became friends with Darien after moving to Angelthene and getting bullied at his new school. Darien was one of the only people who stood up for him.

**Lace Rivera**—Niece to Lionel Savage. Former member of the Huntsmen, though it was never made official.

### THE REAPERS

**Malakai Delaney**— Head of the House of Souls. Older brother to Jewels Delaney. Used to be good friends with Darien Cassel, but their friendship ended the day Darien and his Devils earned the spot at the top of the tiers of Darkslayers.

**Valen Hayes**—Malakai Delaney's Second.

**Sylvan Wolfe**—Malakai Delaney's Third. Named after Sylvan the god.

**Aspen Van Halen**—Best friend to Lace Rivera. Twin sister to Clover Van Halen. Assists Clover with hacking spell systems, databases, etc. She has a crush on Malakai Delaney.

**Brodie Verlice**—Twin brother to Macen Verlice. He recently joined the Reapers as Liam's replacement.

**Macen Verlice**—Twin brother to Brodie Verlice. He recently joined the Reapers as Tyson's replacement.

**Jewels Delaney**—Younger sister to Malakai Delaney.

**Clover Van Halen**—Twin sister to Aspen Van Halen. Hacker for the Reapers.

### THE HUNTSMEN

**Lionel Savage**— Head of the Hunting Grounds and former Right Hand of Randal Slade. Lace's uncle.

**Harley Savage**— Son to Lionel Savage. Cousin to Lace Rivera.

**Seth Marksman**— Second to Lionel Savage.

**Colton Adler**— Third to Lionel Savage.  
**Archer Savage**—Nephew to Lionel Savage. Cousin to Harley and Lace.  
**Shepley Marksman**— Hacker for the Huntsmen.  
**Xander Price**— Assistant hacker to Shepley Marksman.  
**Nathan Rhodes**— Member of the Huntsmen.

## THE ANGELS OF DEATH

**Dominic Valencia**— Head of Death's Landing. Brother to Conrad Valencia. Former member of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet. Been friends with Darien Cassel since childhood.  
**Conrad Valencia**— Brother and Second to Dominic Valencia. Former member of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet. Been friends with Darien Cassel since childhood.  
**Hanli Shadid**— Former member of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet. Third to Dominic Valencia. Aided the Devils at the end of City of Gods and Monsters.  
**Dylan Reed**— Hacker for the Angels of Death. Former member of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet.  
**Gwen Reed**— Assistant hacker to Dylan Reed, who is also her brother. Former member of Angelthene's Aerial Fleet.

## THE WARGS

**Channary Graves**— Head of the House on the Pier. The Wargs have an assortment of rare magical pelts that are enchanted with shifter magic.  
**Lumen Graves**— Channary's daughter. Second to Channary.  
**Umbrielle Graves**— Channary's daughter. Third to Channary.  
**Valary Sternberg**— Darien's former friend with benefits. Threatened Loren at the Devil's Advocate in City of Gods and Monsters.  
**Christa Copenspire**—Recently moved back to Angelthene from the city of Skylen. Her relationship with Darien was long distance and solely physical. It nearly changed to a serious one, but it ended badly between them before this could happen.  
**Jacintha Copenspire**— Sister to Christa Copenspire. Assistant hacker to Isabella Moss.  
**Isabella Moss**— Hacker for the Wargs.  
**Ryleigh Witt**— Sister to Vanessa Witt.  
**Vanessa Witt**— Sister to Ryleigh Witt.

## THE VIPERS

**Jude Monson**— Head of the Den of Vipers. Good friend to the Devils. Aided the Devils at the end of City of Gods and Monsters.  
**Nadia Monson**—Fiancée to Jude Monson.  
**Jessa Gilchrist**— Aided the Devils at the end of City of Gods and Monsters.  
**Sage Monson**—Sister to Jude Monson. Hacker for the Vipers.  
**Carter McKenzie**— Cousin to Jude Monson. Second to Jude Monson.  
**Ivan Gilchrist**— Cousin to Jessa Gilchrist.  
**Race Hunter**— Third to Jude Monson. Aided the Devils at the end of City of Gods and Monsters.  
**Jasmine Rose**— Member of the Vipers. Assistant hacker to Sage Monson.

## HELLSEHERS

**The Terran Imperator**— The most powerful person in all of Terra. Real name is Quinton Lucent.

**Klay Lucent**— Son of Quinton Lucent. He came to Angelthene Academy to watch Loren under his father's instruction.

**Randal Slade**— Former Head of all Darkslaying circles in Angelthene. Father to Darien and Ivyana Cassel; husband to Elsie Cassel/Emberley Slade. Deceased after the events of City of Gods and Monsters.

**Gaven Payne**— One of Randal's former business partners. Gaven is in charge of the trafficking of Blood Staves and other illegal weapons in Angelthene.

**Johnathon Kyle**— CEO of Lucent Enterprises.

**Helia Sophronia**— Loren's mother. Erasmus Sophronia's wife.

**Cyra**— Rabbit messenger. Friend to Erasmus Sophronia. She offered Darien the job to track down Loren in City of Gods and Monsters.

**Tyson Geller**— Former Reaper. Killed by Darien Cassel when he and Liam shot him outside of Blackbird 88 Above.

**Blue**— A hellseher found with a tracking device in her arm.

**Roman 'Shadows' Devlin**— Darien's cousin; Travis's brother. Head of the House of Black in the city of Yveswich, capital of Ker.

**Joyce Atlas**— Tanner's mother. She is a doctor at Angelthene General.

**Kyle**— Tattoo artist and owner of Diablo.

**Maya Reacher**— Younger sister to Maximus Reacher. Nickname was MJ. She died in a house fire caused by faulty equipment used to make Blood Potions.

**Koray and Xander**— Rogue hellsehers in City of Gods and Monsters. They hid their auras to avoid being executed by Randal for collecting without being a part of a house.

**Liam**— Former Reaper. Killed by Darien Cassel outside of Blackbird 88 Above.

**Ian Gray**— A Reaper who was excommunicated by Malakai Delaney in City of Gods and Monsters.

## HUMANS

**Loren Calla**— Real name is Liliana Sophronia. Daughter of Erasmus Sophronia. Possesses the powers of the Arcanum Well. Her father created her with the Well. She was left on the steps of the Temple of the Scarlet Star when she was a baby, where she was soon adopted by Roark Bright. Taega chose to give her the surname 'Calla' to give her some connection to her real name, Lily.

**Arthur J. Kind**— Former weapons technician for Lucent Enterprises. Friend to Darien and Ivyana's mother. He also used to be a doctor, so Darien will sometimes see him for bullet and knife wounds instead of going to hospitals.

**Erasmus Sophronia**— Creator of the Arcanum Well. Father to Liliana/Loren. Founder of the Phoenix Head Society.

**Emberley Slade, née Cassel/Elsie Cassel**— Mother to Darien and Ivyana; wife to Randal Slade. Deceased before the events of City of Gods and Monsters. She died at the stroke of Witching Hour on Darien and Ivyana's fifteenth birthday. Her death was ruled as suicide, but Darien and Ivyana believe Randal killed her.

## WITCHES AND WARLOCKS (VENEFICAE)

**Dallas Bright**— Daughter of Roark and Taega Bright; adoptive sister to Loren Calla. Training to fight for Angelthene's Aerial Fleet.

**Casen Martel/The Butcher**— The lead Blood Potions dealer in the state of Witheredge. Father to Chloe Martel. He is in charge of the fighting ring known as the Chopping Block in the Umbra Forum.

**Taega Bright**— Wife to Roark; mother to Dallas. Former member of the Phoenix Head Society. Her real name is unknown.

**Roark Bright**— The Red Baron. Husband to Taega; father to Dallas. Real name is Elix Danik. Former member of the Phoenix Head Society.

**Finn Solace**— Detective for the Magical Protections Unit of Angelthene. He asked Darien to help him put Cain Nash behind bars in City of Gods and Monsters.

**Detective Nolan**— New Head Detective of Angelthene's MPU.

**Mordred and Penelope**— Witch twins who own Mordred and Penelope's Mortar and Pestle on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star. Loren works for them.

**Benjamin**— Graverobber who lives in Dusk Hollow. Assisted Darien and the others in finding Erasmus's grave in City of Gods and Monsters.

**Cain Nash**— A criminal who was after the Well in City of Gods and Monsters. Darien helped Finn put him behind bars.

**Ivador Langdon**— Former Headmaster of Angelthene Academy for Magic. Deceased after the events of City of Gods and Monsters.

**Dennis Boyd**— Owner of Puerta de la Muerta. Chrysantha's former employer.

**Miles Osborn**— New Headmaster at Angelthene Academy for Magic.

**Agatha**— Hedgewitch and owner of Agatha's Post-Secondary Education for Botany. She used to be a Healer, which is how she met Darien Cassel.

**Ethan McIntyre, Chad, and Garrett**— Students at Angelthene Academy.

**Tamika Isley**— Optometrist at Angelthene Optometry.

**Antonio Perez**— A mob boss who owns the Pit.

**Grayson Phipps**— A teacher at Angelthene Academy.

**Rose Griffith**— A teacher at Angelthene Academy.

**Whalen**— A bouncer at the Devil's Advocate.

**Tanya**— Receptionist for Caliginous on Silverway.

**Chloe Martel**— Daughter to Casen Martel.

**Dresden**— A warlock who worked for Cain Nash in City of Gods and Monsters.

## WEREWOLVES (LYCANTHROPE)

**Logan Sands**— Head of the Silverwood District and alpha of all werewolf packs in Angelthene. Also known as Shadowback.

**Sabrina Van Arsdell**— Best friend to Loren Calla and Dallas Bright. A witch who was turned into a werewolf by Logan Sands.

**Sebastian**— Second to Logan Sands. Also known as Cryo. Member of the Guardian pack.

**Chrysantha Sands**— Sister to Logan Sands. Also known as Tundra. Member of the Guardian pack.

**Cash**— Third to Logan Sands. Also known as Silverrain. Member of the Guardian pack.

**Big**— Head Chef for Silver Claw.

## VAMPIRES (LAMIAE)

**Calanthe Croft**— Head Vampire of the District of Drakon; belongs to the House of the Blood Rose.

**Emilie Croft**— Calanthe's daughter. Heir to the House of the Blood Rose.

**Jaden Croft**— Emilie's half-brother. His reasons for returning to Angelthene are up for debate.

**Baylor**— Former manager of the Devil's Advocate.

**Viktor**— Member of the House of the Blood Rose.

**Lenora Aldonold**— Member of the House of the Blood Rose and Calanthe Croft's Second.

**Desiree Denaldi**— One of the twins who are set to inherit the throne of the Silver Torch.

## FAMILIAR SPIRITS

**Bandit**— Familiar to Darien Cassel. Short-haired dog. He has an ongoing feud with Mortifer and often tries to eat him.

**Singer**— Familiar to Loren Calla. Former shepherd dog. Brought back from the dead by the Widow, a deal made by Darien Cassel, who paid for the dog's return with years off his immortal lifespan. The number of years, and the conditions surrounding the agreement, is unknown.

**Mortifer**— House Hob of Hell's Gate. He was formerly owned by a mob boss who treated him badly, but was rescued by Darien Cassel when Darien was sent to collect the man for a bounty. Mortifer protects Hell's Gate with rare Hob magic in return for endless ice chips. He is smaller than most Hobs, but no less powerful.

**Creature**— Familiar to Malakai Delaney. Bat with an arrowhead tail and a big attitude.

**Twitch**— Familiar to Jack Steele. Jaguar with facial tics, hence the name Twitch.

**Soot**— Familiar to Ivyana Cassel. Short-haired dog whose appearance is nearly identical to Bandit's.

**Grim**—Familiar to Maximus Reacher. Mountain lion. Best friends with Bandit.

**Ghost**— Familiar to Dallas Bright. Winged tiger.

**Silver**— Familiar to Tanner Atlas. Wolf with a sweet tooth.

**Noble**— Familiar to Travis Devlin. Mastiff dog.

**Cinder**— Familiar to Lace Rivera. House cat with sapphire eyes.

**Pebble**— Familiar to Sabrina Van Arsdell. Crow.

## THE NAMELESS

**The Widow**— A giant spider. She built her home in the Crossroads known as the Wishing Fountain. Her real name is Araneae.

**The Pale Man**— A humanoid creature who likes to speak in riddles and has the ability to predict the future. He lives in a den beyond the Chalk Door.

**The Faun**— A horned creature who walks on cloven feet and lives beneath an old fig tree in Angelthene National Forest. Darien had paid a visit to this creature when he was fifteen to see if he could make a trade to have his mother back.

**The Soul-eater**— A creature who guards the Crossroads under the Strangler Fig in Whitebridge.

## VAMPIRE HOUSES OF ANGELTHENE

Blood Rose  
Silver Torch  
Corpse Flower  
Hammer Orchid  
Blue Lily

## WEREWOLF PACKS OF ANGELTHENE

*Guardians  
Queenswater  
Eastside  
Black Mirror*

## VENEFICAE COVENS OF ANGELTHENE

*Upper West  
Lower West  
Northwood  
Farhallows*

## MISCELLANEOUS

**Mr. Crispy**— A plant that played a role in discovering the antidote for the curse in *City of Gods and Monsters*. Mr. Crispy lives on the windowsill at Mordred and Penelope's.

**Miss Prickles**— A plant that lives at Mordred and Penelope's. She developed a crush on Darien Cassel after hearing his voice.

**Cluckles**— Bandit's rubber chicken. The toy was purchased by Darien Cassel from Whisker's Pets and Things on the Avenue of the Scarlet Star.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have many people to thank for helping me push through this massive book, but I'll keep this as short as I can, considering it is already a million pages long.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kayla is the author of the House of Devils series and the Ice and Iron series. She started writing City of Gods and Monsters when she was in high school, so the characters and the world they live in are very close to her heart. She is in love with the desert, addicted to matcha, and dreams that she will one day be driving Darien's car. When she isn't writing, she can be found reading, spending time in nature, or fighting her husband for the Nintendo controller.

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